The idea that a syllabus can be art has a long tradition, but here Nick Thurston reports on the development of a meta-syllabus that enables DIY movements to create bodies of knowledge free from institutional control.

Pirate Care Syllabus is described by its initiators as a ‘free digital tool for sharing tacit knowledges and activating political pedagogies from disobedient practices of social reproduction’. That project remit sounds complicated, zealous and speculative because it is. Yet the project’s form is extraordinarily functional and, most importantly, it works.

PCS is a co-learning tool developed as a form of non-art. It enables self-organising activist groups to work online and offline together against what its initiators call the ‘neoliberal crisis of care’ – the exclusionary, exploitative and proprietary co-optation of care provision by institutions enabled by neoliberal policies, which increasingly affects every aspect of social welfare, from housing to education to mobility. Unsurprisingly, given its technopolitics, PCS was itself co-founded through collaboration and the framework it pioneers is built to enable networks of further collaboration.

Italian artist and theorist Valeria Graziano has worked extensively on the commoning of healthcare systems and other care infrastructures, as well as public education programmes, including those devised by galleries, museums and biennales. Croatian media activists Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak (who also work in the visual arts and theatre respectively) have a long history of making and championing tools for cultural piracy and may be best known for their brilliant shadow library (or, technically, aggregated library of comrades’ libraries), Memory of the World. The three met during a fellowship in Leuphana, Germany, and now work together at the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University.

It would be too simple to sum up their collaboration as one plus two, or content creator plus developers, or epistemology plus technology. Rather, this project has distilled their expertise to create a new infrastructural model for knowledge sharing. Their model is extrapolated from the growing popularity of online syllabi among social justice movements, which tend to be DIY community-made lists of reading materials, posts and, ultimately, links to things elsewhere on the internet that may or may not stay there. The PCS approach is to create a self-sufficient technological framework that can store, organise and connect new and existing syllabi and their media in ways that are robust, engineered on ethical principles, and easy to access. The public hub for the first iteration of all this is online: syllabus.pirate.care

Anyone who has shifted online to engage with art during lockdown as a producer or consumer will know that the technology shapes the experience. Anyone who is currently trying to re-model the teaching of Fine Art into a ‘blended learning experience’ will know that the technology can also contort the pedagogy. PCS takes seriously the co-effective interdependency of epistemology and technology, of content and tool, of one plus two creating something other than three. That is how they aim to break the chain of social reproduction that makes neoliberal individuation seem sensible, even inevitable. The ‘disobedience’ is technical and digital.
as much as it is embodied and grounded. The ‘tacit
knowledge’ is learned and applied through software
design as much as it is in the emergency IRL contexts
of humanitarian crises.

By refusing database-driven systems and by using
plaintext content and a simple, common mark-up
language (Markdown), different syllabi can be collabora-
tively written and easily forked. The initial syllabus
(the reflexive Pirate Care iteration) and those that
follow are each a structured set of pointers to plaintext
content and other media resources – mostly publica-
tions, which are stored in shadow libraries so cloned
digital copies can be freely downloaded by anyone
anytime. This keeps both the syllabus and its associ-
ated media in a stable relation and outside property
laws. It also means user-groups can transnationally
connect different community knowledges by creating
their own structured sets of pointers to material within
the network. Groups can create, share and secure their
own overlaying syllabi, making a self-determined
cause-oriented basis for inter-community solidarity.

Whether you consider such technical decision-mak-
ing to be an act of composition in the sense we associate
with art will depend on your investments. If you think
it might, trying to understand PCS formally as a
work of non-art raises the question of what exactly
‘the work’ is: the tool and the website or its content
and holdings?

The answer, I would say, is both and more: ‘the
work’ is the public life of the syllabus itself, which is
the performance of its catalogues, finding aids, hold-
ings and interface in concert with its users and devel-
opers, and what they collectively make possible. In its
broadest sense, as one syllabus in particular, PCS is
the proof of concept for a lateral publishing framework.
The name of that framework is Sandpoints, and its
publication form is the securely networked syllabus.

The idea that syllabi can be an artistic form, or the
composition of syllabi might be an artistic act, has a
long art history and its own modern canon, from the
Bauhaus to the politically blocked Manifesta 6 School
that should have happened in Nicosia. A syllabus serves
like a map and a contract. A syllabus is not a curricu-
lum, though they come from the same discourse of
discourse. It is typically a document that organises
and communicates information about a course of
learning and teaching, and defines with some authority
the roles and responsibilities of the people or groups
involved on both sides of that equation.

Collectively editable syllabi that refuse this equation
– the structural principle that there are learners
and teachers and they must remain distinct within a
disymmetrical power relation – have a growing status,
as a form, among artists with a radical commitment
to free culture. Sean Dockray, who founded AAAAARG
and recently joined the development team for
Sandpoints, puts it clearly: ‘The syllabus is the mani-
festo of the 21st century … As a programme, the sylla-
bus shifts the burden of action onto the readers …
It is decidedly not self-contained, however it often
circulates as if it were.’

Just as syllabi only matter in so far as they get applied, online frameworks like Sandpoints are made to
matter by offline action. The PCS was conceived for the
‘Dopolavoro’ programme organised by the Drugo More
centre in Rijeka (see Letter from Rijeka pp42–43), a
programme billed as a ‘school of thought’ for ‘artists
and non-sentimental researchers’ to explore the ‘types
and conditions’ of work in post-industrial Croatia as
part of the city’s 2020 European Capital of Culture
scheme. Graziano, Mars and Medak’s collective contribu-
tion was to organise a writing retreat with members of
social justice groups in November 2019, at which their
syllabus tool could be populated and tested but also
responsively adapted. The structure and content they
workshopped promotes care – understood as something
like the co-operation of activities and relations that
produce meaningful social bonds – and those cultures
that reproduce care, which sensitise us against disre-
gard, negligence, resignation and individuation.
The public life of this syllabus is dedicated to helping
us co-learn how to care and how to foster new social
imaginaries that care more about caring.

The pandemic and its news cycle have made it
impossible to ignore the fact that care is a political
notion. The disjointed systems of official response to
Covid-19 have also shown that social modes of caring
are labour and that such labour is undervalued,
whether the people involved are self-isolating workers
on zero-hour contracts or customer-service staff at our
national galleries. In the framework of PCS, ‘piracy’
describes a militant mode of caring, one that works
illegally or in the grey areas outside the law to organise
cultures of care against social injustices. Within the
current syllabus, most of these are community-led
responses to the local consequences of systemic gaps
in welfare and humanitarian support for disadvantaged
people, responses that refuse to be compliant with local
or international regulations.

In early March the PCS was publicly launched as
part of a group exhibition at Kunsthalle Wein, ‘…of
bread, wine, cars, security and peace’ curated by
WHW. Shortly after the opening, lockdown took hold.
Neoliberal norms that regulate social systems and
commercialise access to them may have triggered this
project, but the pandemic and its wake will make tools
like this tragically urgent – for the 99% at least, on a
sliding scale of desperation predictably indexed against
wealth, gender, race and geopolitical location. Planned
PCS writing retreats in Vienna and a summer camp in
Rijeka had to be cancelled, but a postponed show will
open at an ex-industrial space called Exportdrvo in
Rijeka on 7 October.

The future of this publishing framework, online
and offline, will likely depend on finding ways to
pluralise the syllabi, develop fuller pedagogic schema
from them, and share the Sandpoints software behind
it all. That will need time, infrastructure, imagination
and, of course, collective care.

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