

Profile

Pirate Care Syllabus

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.

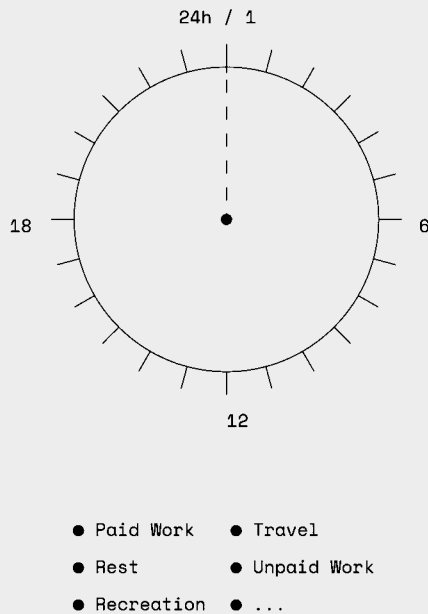
PCS is a co-learning tool developed as a form of non-art. It enables self-organising activist groups to work online and offline together against what its initiators call the 'neoliberal crisis of care' - the exclusionary, exploitative and proprietary co-optation of care provision by institutions enabled 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

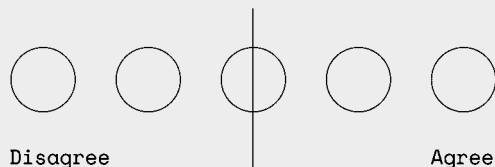
24-HOUR CLOCK (at the moment)



details from Pirate Care Syllabus's workshop PDF

CREATING CONSENSUS

Within A Community, If Someone
Can't Afford The Shared Cost, We
Always Need To Help



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 collaboratively 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 publications, which are stored in shadow libraries so cloned digital copies can be freely downloaded by anyone anytime. This keeps both the syllabus and its associated 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-making 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, holdings and interface in concert with its users and developers, 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 curriculum, though they come from the same discourse of pedagogy. 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 dissymmetrical power relation – have a growing status, as a form, among artists with a radical commitment to free culture. Sean Dockray, who founded AAAARG and recently joined the development team for Sandpoints, puts it clearly: ‘The syllabus is the manifesto of the 21st century ... As a programme, the syllabus 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 contribution 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 disregard, 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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