

Dungeon Crawlers and Anarchists: Co-Designing Programming Teaching Experiences

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Introduction

You find yourself in a large room with no windows; the air is still, and nothing suggests the passing of time. The door closes behind you, and it won't open for another hour or two. As you stand in front of the room, you realise there is nothing between you and what seems to be a party of the most intimidating, unpredictable creatures.

Students.

Fear not, though. You are about to learn how to deal with this kind of situation. Dealing with students' expectations (and your own) can be hard, but we believe that by working together, you will be able to deliver the learning experience that gets everyone to the next level.

This chapter is inspired in equal parts by tabletop role-playing and anarchist pedagogies. It was created to help you in structuring the learning experience for your course. More specifically, we present steps you can take during an initial or preliminary learning activity for a course, preparing material that will help you:

- get to know your students, their expectations and shortcomings
- organise teams for collaborative group work
- relate learning sessions and activities to the course's learning outcomes
- structure the sequence of learning activities
- share resources

This system is inspired by variations of Role-Playing games that do not require a Dungeon Master as mediator, such as various ones from [Tomkin Press](https://tomkinpress.com/)⁹⁷, which reflects horizontal approaches from anarchist pedagogies in higher education, in which students and educators operate side-by-side. (Wilkinson and Ashworth 2025).

We do acknowledge the tensions between anarchist practices and the

realities of the higher education systems to which we belong, and the risk of coming across as having a somewhat inauthentic, opportunistic take on anarchism. Admittedly, we operate (and, arguably, succeed) within a system that is not as flexible, self-governing, or non-hierarchical as the one we are taking inspiration from. Still, we believe incremental, practical changes are a possible way of moving towards more inclusive and democratic realities.

Disclaimer

The collaborative, open-ended nature of some steps described here might suit workshops and short courses better than credit-bearing modules with strictly pre-defined learning outcomes. That said, syllabi are often flexible enough to allow for this ad-hoc, collaborative approach (or at least some tweaking).

⁹⁷ <https://tomkinpress.com/>

Accessing the Toolkit

Go to [this chapter's companion repository](#)⁹⁸. There, you will find a toolkit for planning your teaching that includes templates for:

- Character Sheet
- Bestiary
- Adventure Map
- Party Guidelines
- Equipment List
- Skills and Spellbook

These are available as .docx and .rtf documents, but feel free to adapt them to whatever format or platform you want.

Character Building: Presenting Learners and Educators' Profiles

A good first step is to understand everyone's aspirations and previous experiences. At this stage, invite all students and educators (including yourself) to complete a **Character Sheet**⁹⁹. Once everyone has completed theirs, go through a round of introductions. Focus on understanding everyone's strong points, ambitions, and fears.

The Character Sheet could potentially help identify potential topics for class and barriers to be removed.

Example: Character Sheet

- Creation: 15 min
- Discussion: 15 min

Expectations:

Learning how to manage and collaborate in bigger projects using git/GitHub

Previous education and professional experiences:

Self-taught web-development.

(...)

Study Skills Weaknesses:

Might have developed bad habits from self-teaching.

The Anarchist Bit:

Anarchist pedagogies support and are supported by the construction of subjectivities (DeLeon 2012). Feel free to extrapolate the Character Sheet to an exploration of long-term goals, ideals, and a broader sense of identity, even if (perhaps *especially* if) they diverge from immediate, utilitarian aims of the course.

In some cases, however, discourse around subjectivities and course objectives might intersect: students might want to discuss their preferences for sectors they'd wish to work with (for instance: non-profits instead of big tech), or their affinity with open-source initiatives as a matter of citizenship and participation.

⁹⁸ <https://zenodo.org/records/17702161>

⁹⁹ The Character Sheet document was designed to help learners understand

and share their own experience, needs, expectations, skills, and challenges. It is informed by [Student Persona](#)

[templates provided by the Open University](#) under Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial licenses.

Challenges Ahead: Establishing Learning Outcomes and Syllabus

Use the **Bestiary** template to establish (or remind) learners of the course learning outcomes and syllabus. Discuss what they will learn, giving examples if necessary. Depending on your course's flexibility, outcomes and topics can be decided on the spot. Usually, you will want to choose a set of learning outcomes and lessons beforehand¹⁰⁰.

Example: Bestiary

- Discussion and adjustments: 15 min

Name:

Create GitHub repository for your project

[x] Main Quest [] Side Quest

Learning Outcomes:

1. Apply best practices to source code management and versioning

Challenge:

Follow all steps from creating a GitHub account to creating a new (empty) repository.

Relevant Equipment and Skills:

GitHub website, GitHub Desktop, Online learning material on GitHub for beginners.

The Anarchist Bit:

Once again, there should be plenty of space for learners to express themselves by suggesting topics for co-creating their learning experience. Such a practice is present in many other progressive pedagogies (for instance, see Freire 1996).

In practical terms, that can be very beneficial to the course. It's not uncommon that students are informed about emerging practices and tools that can enrich the course and learning experience for everyone. As educators might struggle with keeping up-to-date with professional practices, being attentive to students' perspectives can be really helpful.

The Treasure Map: Structuring the Course and Learning Activities

Use the **Adventure Map**¹⁰¹ to discuss the sequence of learning material and activities, assessment (beasts), and how they relate to learning outcomes. Keep the discussion open so that learners can suggest, based on their expertise, perceived needs, or fears, how to best organise the learning trajectory. To structure their journey, place items from the **Bestiary** into the journey map, associating them with the course's learning outcomes.

¹⁰⁰ Many programmes require educators to achieve specific learning outcomes. If you are the one in charge of keeping the programme or module specification form, a good practice

would be keeping it flexible enough so that new, emerging topics can be brought into the syllabus.

¹⁰¹ The Adventure Map document was designed to help educators and

students to set out learning outcomes, syllabi, and assessments. It is informed by [material created by the University of Leeds OD&PL](#).

Example: Adventure Map				
Discussion and adjustments: 30 min				
Session	Topics	Main Quest	Sidequest(s)	Learning Outcomes
1	Source-code management	Create GitHub repository for your project	Follow another student's repository	1. Apply best practices to source code management and versioning

The Anarchist Bit:

The collective effort into creating a learning journey that does not follow a blueprint is characteristic of anarchist pedagogies (DeLeon 2012). Still, students and educators might benefit from some structure, in which case it is advisable to outline a learning path. Feel free, however, to continuously discuss, review, and re-negotiate that path.

That discussion could open opportunities for improving and streamlining teaching delivery. You might notice that students might need more (or less) sessions and materials on specific topics. Alternatively, you might consider making additional content available for students who need (or want) it for either keeping up with the group, or extending their knowledge.

P.A.R.T.Y: Organising Groups and Groupwork

As a group (or groups, depending on the number of students), complete the **Party Guidelines** sheet¹⁰², establishing ground rules on how to deal with each other and the group, as well as roles for each participant.

Go over the **Adventure Map**, discussing how to best achieve the challenges (either individually or as pairs or teams). Discuss different strategies for group work; for instance, should everyone work on every aspect of the assignment, or should they focus on their own areas of expertise and interest?

Party Guidelines should help teamwork run smoothly, including agreements for conflict resolution.

¹⁰² The Party Guidelines document was designed to help learners manage their groupwork. They are informed by [frameworks from the Institute for](#)

[Academic Development](#) (University of Edinburgh 2024) and the Learn Higher CETL at the University of Bradford (Learn Higher 2012a, 2012b) under

Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial licences.

Example: Party Guidelines

- Discussion and adjustments: 15 min

Topic	Rule
What should someone do if they cannot attend a meeting or complete work on time?	Group will redistribute work according to members' strengths.

The Anarchist Bit:

When deciding rules for working groups, aiming for consensus would be ideal. A quick introduction and effective guide on how to achieve consensus¹⁰³ in group meetings was created by workers' co-op of campaigners Seeds for Change, and could be brought into discussion.

Conducting group work can be challenging, particularly when assessment is involved, as students might question their lack of autonomy within a group. It's worth noting, however, that: (a) individual autonomy and freedom is not necessarily the utmost important value in anarchism (see, for instance, Suissa 2006, 14); (b) although the traditional role of group leaders might be harder to justify, certain groups of anarchist values operated under leaders stripped down of authoritarian coercive powers (a good example being pirates as described by Graeber, n.d.).

In practice, students might need to be reminded of how group work allows them to develop more complex outcomes; and even though we are advocates for self-governing, there might be the need for some mediation from educators in case conflicts arise within a group.

A Kind of Magic: Distributing Learning Material

Whether you are using a textbook, slides, PDFs, online videos, or anything else, use the **Skills and Spellbook** to signpost where students can find learning material that is relevant to their learning journey. This can be tailored to individual lessons and activities, or as a general compendium (Warhammer pun not intended), and they could be presented all at once or separately as the learning advances. Again, you could populate it with resources related to students' aspirations.

Example: Skills and Spellbook

Topic:

Source code versioning

Resource Name:

Online learning material on GitHub for beginners

What it is for:

Learning the basics of GitHub for software versioning.

Study Skills Weaknesses:

Might have developed bad habits from self-teaching.

Information and Instructions:

Accessible through GitHub's YouTube playlist¹⁰⁴

Equipment List: Providing Software and Resources

To complete the setup, provide your group with an **Equipment List** of software and other resources they might need to use to advance the journey. You should have a preliminary list ready, but be open to suggestions from students. Below, an example that would support our student with his desire to learn source code management and versioning.

Example: Equipment List

Websites:

Name: GitHub

Purpose: Source code management and versioning

URL: <https://www.github.com>

Software:

Name: GitHub Desktop

Purpose: Source code versioning
URL for download or installation instructions:

<https://desktop.github.com/download/>

¹⁰³

<http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/short-consensus>

¹⁰⁴

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL>

[0lo9MOBetEFcp4SCWinBdpml9B2U25-f](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0lo9MOBetEFcp4SCWinBdpml9B2U25-f)

Setup Complete: Happy Adventures!

Once you have completed the previous steps, you will have generated everything you and your students need to accomplish course objectives and keep track of your achievements. At the start of each learning session, use the **Adventure Map** to update students on their next steps, and on how far they have travelled so far.

Throughout the semester, following the plan from the **Adventure Map**, present new tasks, resources, and skills, from the **Bestiary**, **Equipment List**, and **Skills and Spellbook**, respectively.

Frequently remind students to keep their **Character Sheet** updated with the new skills they acquire.

If conducting group work, remind them of the rules expressed in their **Party Guidelines** whenever there is conflict.

At the end of the course, remind students of their journey, highlighting the learning outcomes achieved along the way. Hopefully, this collaborative approach to learning will have made your job (and of your students) easier and more enjoyable. We would love to hear from you about your experiences, so please feel free to get in touch!

Happy teaching.

The Anarchist Bit:

Another characteristic of anarchist pedagogies, particularly in the arts (and programming is often seen as a liberal art), is how they embrace the fluidity that is necessary for making changes to the learning experience after reflection and evaluation (Wilkinson and Ashworth 2025). After running your campaign, don't be afraid of modifying, discarding, or adapting the system we just proposed according to your experience and that of your students.

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