

DREAMING OF DISSENT: ROCHDALE COLLEGE AND THE FAILED DREAM OF COMMUNAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

The paper looks at experimental alternative education systems to explore different approaches to pedagogical theories of post-secondary education. The paper focuses on the story of Rochdale College, an experimental free-form college and communal housing project associated with the University of Toronto between 1968 and 1975. The aims, theories and methods of Rochdale College are contextualized by an examination of two theorists on alternative education: John Dewey and Paul Goodman. The theories of Dewey and Goodman are explored through a brief examination of two experimental colleges that preceded Rochdale: The Experimental College (at Tufts University from 1927-32) and Black Mountain College in North Carolina (active from 1933-57). Ideas regarding alternative forms of education were integrated into socio-political ideas from the 1960s counterculture movement in America and Canada, and a major test site for a form of counterculture education was the controversial experiment called Rochdale College. The paper explores ideas of what an alternative post-secondary education system has looked like in the past, in order to pose questions about the ways it could take shape in the future.

Keywords: Rochdale College; John Dewey; Paul Goodman; Black Mountain College; Experimental College; counterculture; alternative education; Toronto; anarchic education; free-form education; critical pedagogy.

Introduction

There are probably as many ideas of what Rochdale was as there were people who floated through its doors between 1968 and 1975. It was many things to many people: college, art space, theatre, studio, ashram, crash pad, drug den, hippie commune. Home to intellectuals, dropouts, artists, biker gangs, professors, wanderers, travellers, and, eventually, cops, Rochdale College began as a dream for a new type of student housing: an independent centre of communal living and experimental education right in the heart of Toronto. At turns brilliant, absurd, hilarious, violent, chaotic, inspired, horrific and ambitious, the story of Rochdale is the story of different ideas of how an 'ideal community of free people' should unfold. And the college was as vague and chaotic as the notion of freedom itself.

Rochdale College did not come out of nowhere, but represents one incarnation in a history of schools and communities whose focus on alternative and experimental education offers different perspectives to the current hegemony of corporate owned and operated post-secondary institutions. I believe these different perspectives, regardless of how successful they were, are vital to the future development of colleges and universities in Canada and beyond. Rife as they are with problems, a look at alternative frameworks of education such as Rochdale can provide a dissenting voice to help us peer beyond our assumptions about what education is and what it can be. We will begin by looking at ideas from American educational thinkers John Dewey and Paul Goodman, then look briefly at two pre-Rochdale examples of educational communities: the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin and Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Although these places deserve their own careful examination, I wish to emphasize the developmental processes which Rochdale can be seen to have adopted and attempted to implement.

Dewey, Goodman & the Idea of Experiential/Experimental Education

John Dewey was an American philosopher who wrote on a variety of topics, but is best remembered as a philosopher of education. Dewey's mode of thought revolves around his commitment to the principles of democracy; the idea that all aspects of life be a series of fluid self-organizing systems which constantly reflect, criticize and change. For Dewey it is all about *process*. Education should be a process of self discovery; an exploration of ideas in an inquisitive environment. The teacher should be more of a guide than an instructor transmitting information to passive receptors, and students should be given the freedom to explore within a given topic without adhering to the stultifying "'assign-study-recite' technique" (Dewey, 1964, p. *xxiii*). Instead of separating the disciplines as branches of information hemmed in by tradition, different perspectives are brought to bear on specific problems, and the process of education is always firmly grounded in experience.

Education is, for Dewey, the working through of a series of problems using intellectual, emotional, psychological and interpersonal skills, leading towards broader, more complex problems. Through the creation of a broader learning *environment*, teachers, students and the subject matter co-exist in a dynamic relational process (Garrison, 1998). Garrison goes on to state that "educational aims must be capable of translation into methods that fit the activities of those receiving instruction and that they must foster the kind of environments required to liberate and to organize *their* capacities" (1998, p. 69). As we will see with the Experimental College, Black Mountain College and Rochdale, Dewey believed that "[t]he classroom should be looked upon as a total environment where physical and social conditions, as well as abstract intellectual material are essential features which effect the learning process" (Dewey, 1964, p. *xxiv*). Education should be *interaction*, not action, between other people and the environment, such that

the lone thinking student should "be replaced by a community of inquirers who share in the task of uncovering, creating, and articulating truths" (Boisvert, 1998, p. 99).¹

Paul Goodman was an educator, writer, artist and theorist who is perhaps best remembered for his pedagogical ideas. Goodman proposed a more ecological educational experience centred on the pursuit of individual interests *within* a network of individuals in a community. Goodman criticized the specialization of knowledge which operated on a grading system that had little to do with life outside college. For Goodman, being attentive to natural drives, desires and interests was integral to the process of holistic education. Teachers act as guides, stimulating students to discover more about themselves and their interrelation to current socio-cultural conditions. Goodman criticized the University as elitist and separate from the community, creating a league of isolated, over-specialized individuals. In his book *Compulsory Mis-Education*, Goodman proposes two changes. First is to encourage colleges to make two years outside school a requirement for admission. This would prevent high school graduates from going straight through to an undergraduate degree program, and was meant to encourage young people to take more time to develop as individuals and gain experiences, whether it be work, volunteering, travel, or other pursuits (Goodman, 1964). His second proposal, in line with Dewey, was to eliminate grades. Instead, more onus should be placed on graduates being tested for the jobs they apply for. Goodman asks: "[w]hy should Harvard professors do the testing for corporations and graduate-schools?" (1964, p. 127). He believes that grading is not, as many think, a proper motivational tool, but merely an overbearing obligation which effectively eliminates any organic interest in a subject matter by focusing all the students attention on the

¹ For more on John Dewey's philosophy of education, see R.S. Peters, *John Dewey Reconsidered*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977; John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997; Richard Pring, *John Dewey A Philosopher of Education for Our Time?*, New York: Continuum, 2007; Steven Fesmire, *Dewey*, New York: Routledge, 2015.

ends and not the means.² In this way, Goodman and Dewey both wish to eliminate the ends-oriented style of education to render it more exploratory, playful, fluid, and open. Let us look now at a few institutions that attempted to implement some of these ideas.

Sites of Experimentation: The Experimental College & Black Mountain College

These examples represent something of a continuum of alternative education. The Experimental College existed within the University of Wisconsin, Black Mountain was an independent college created by a group of teachers and artists seeking alternatives, and Rochdale was an autonomous self-organizing college with little to no outside direction. These experiments trace a movement away from mainstream Universities towards attempts for increasingly self-organized systems. The brain child of professor Alexander Micklejohn, The Experimental College began in 1927. Micklejohn "conceived the Experimental College as the first two years of college, which would constitute the students' liberal or general education, enabling them to learn to think critically and to construct a framework on which to add further, specialized information" (Brown, 1983, p. 93). It was a college built "to teach all kinds of students to think so they would be able to function as free people in a self-governing society" (Brown, 1983, p. 91), though sadly the mores of the time prevented the admission of women.

The first year was a study of 5th Century Athens: its politics, history, art, philosophy and religion. The second year was a study of 20th Century American civilization approached from similar scholarly perspectives (Brown, 1983). In this way a comparative base was built, encouraging students to work through common problems of human existence and how various

² For more on Goodman's critical stance regarding youth in post-war American culture and its relation to education see *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System*, New York: Vintage Books, 1960; also, for Goodman's own impressions of Black Mountain College, see Paul Goodman, "A Visit to Black Mountain College", *Change*, 9(4), 1977.

Dreaming of Dissent: Rochdale College and the Failed Dream of Communal Education

cultures have dealt with them. During the summer break, students were expected to do a sociological study of their local community, and present these findings in light of course material. Expected to do much learning outside the classroom, students were taught to take a closer look at the world in which they lived. This was meant to provide students with more real world experience, and to get them to think critically about underlying value structures of American society. Related to Goodman's emphasis on community based ideas, Mieklejohn believed that it was "impossible to meaningfully alter the lives of people by concentrating exclusively on their education and ignoring the kind of society in which they live and in which their education takes place" (Wolfe, 1970, p. 32). Teachers were encouraged to become less specialized and to branch out into other subjects of study, so that students had a ever-widening base of knowledge to draw upon. In addition, to encourage freer learning devoid of the reward system students were used to, no formal grading existed until a final grade was given for the students overall performance over the two years. Although Meiklejohn wished to expand the program into a four-year degree, the onset of the Depression and lack of University interest caused the Experimental College to close in 1932 after teaching only 327 students (Brown, 1983). Though not widely known, the Experimental College led the way towards other liberal arts colleges throughout America.

Black Mountain began in 1933, the year after the Experimental College closed, and emerged out of a progressive movement of social policies in the American Depression. It was the product of efforts by a man called John Andrew Rice. Rice was a student of Dewey's, and gathered a team of professors, artists and craftsmen together to create an alternative form of education in which student life would blur indistinctly with private life. Black Mountain College was, in some ways, the American continuation of the Bauhaus School in Germany, with early

teachers coming directly to escape the climate of Nazism (Duberman, 1972). The Bauhaus was another early experimental institute that focused more on applied skills, desiring to create craftsmen rather than intellectuals. Like Black Mountain, the teachers at the Bauhaus believed in a more holistic development for students; to teach a series of arts and crafts is to develop students into broader, more well-rounded individuals able to create and produce in the modern world.³

Black Mountain, unlike the Bauhaus, concerned itself more on producing intellectuals and artists than artisans. More focus was paid to intellectual endeavours, but many teachers who came directly from the Bauhaus to Black Mountain continued to teach creative expression through the perspective of gradually acquiring the various skills of the craftsman.⁴ The College was based on a plot of land in North Carolina outside of Asheville. One large building served as the main campus, and various cabins and other smaller facilities served as housing, classrooms and workshops. Students and younger teachers lived together in the main building, and married teachers or those with kids lived in nearby cabins. Students were free to attend a series of core seminars while pursuing their own independent course of study. Although no courses were required, and no explicit grading occurred (though sometimes grades would be written in secret by professors in case students wished to apply for Universities in the future), "[s]tudents had advisors, formal and otherwise, but finally were free to choose whatever they wanted to study" (Duberman, 1972, p. 109). This open, grade-free format had its issues and opponents, and the College was not accredited, but the idea behind Black Mountain was that education should not be

³ For more on the continuity between the Bauhaus and Black Mountain, see Joanne C. Ellert, "The Bauhaus and Black Mountain College", *The Journal of General Education*, 24(3), 1972.

⁴ This was particularly true of Anni and Josef Albers, two influential teachers at both the Bauhaus and Black Mountain. For a detailed description of their teaching methods, see Chapter 3 in Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972, p. 55-74.

a matter of achieving A's but of growing as a person in psychological, social, emotional, spiritual and intellectual ways.⁵

Some succeeded in this open format, and some floundered, but Black Mountain offered something different. Set apart from the urban world, it was as much an experiment in communal living as an educational facility. Black Mountain offered a tranquil place to pursue interests, learn, develop, reflect, and live with others in a close-knit community. Meals and meetings were shared between student and teacher alike, with students free to participate in faculty meetings and help direct the program. Some of its students and faculty included Robert Rauschenberg, Franz Kline, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Charles Olsen, Buckminster Fuller, Willem de Kooning and Joseph Albers, making Black Mountain a significant site for developments in modern American visual art, poetry, dance and music.⁶

Our cursory look at these two alternative systems should shed light on how and why Rochdale emerged in the late 1960s. Rochdale College emerged from a mixture of '60s countercultural ideas with ideas about education stemming from such theorists as Dewey and Goodman, and such sites as the Experimental College and Black Mountain. If we take core concepts from these alternative institutions and combine them with the '60s spirit of exploration, freedom of expression, and inclusivity, we eventually come at a place called Rochdale College.

⁵ For a look at the unique lifestyle and educational format that emerged at Black Mountain College see *Fully Awake: Black Mountain College*, Dir. Neely House & Cathryn Davis Zimmer, Watertown, MA: Documentary Education Resources, 2008.

⁶ For a deeper look at the artists and intellectuals who taught at Black Mountain, see Vincent Katz & Martin Brody, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003; Eva Diaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015.

Be Bold and Lie Truthfully: The Story of Rochdale College

Truth be told, Rochdale College was never really a college, and it had little to do with the English commune of 1844 where the college got its name (Sharpe, 1987). Even its opening wasn't really an opening. It was built principally to solve the growing problem of student housing in the area surround the University of Toronto. Construction began on the two concrete towers of Rochdale in 1968 from a five million dollar government loan, but a worker strike left the place unfinished for the start date of September 1969 (Sharpe, 1987). Nevertheless, in what became the Rochdale spirit, the college opened anyways, and hundreds of optimistic people moved into a construction zone. The East wing was a conventionally organized apartment complex, and the West wing had more communal living arrangements. It soon became clear that the original plan of student housing was going out the proverbial window. Receiving over 2000 applications for its 800 spaces (Sharpe, 1987), Rochdale was soon flooded with a wide cross-section of people. In particular, people began flocking to Rochdale after Toronto police began clearing out and cleaning up the nearby Yorkville neighbourhood, the gathering place for beatniks, hippies, and other young and potentially rebellious youth.⁷ With Yorkville gone, most of them began crashing at nearby Rochdale. Although the number of official residents was around 700 that first year, the number of crashers was estimated at around 1500 (Mietkiewicz & Mackowycz, 1988).

But what about education? Rochdale College was not planned as a college for some ambitious pedagogical purpose, but for the massive tax break governments give to colleges (Sharpe, 1987). Despite this pragmatic reason, there were many in the early years that genuinely tried to make Rochdale College live up to its name. The College was to be a totally open

⁷ For a closer examination of the broad countercultural social movements in the 1960s in American and Canada, see Theodor Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition*, Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1969.

Dreaming of Dissent: Rochdale College and the Failed Dream of Communal Education

educational environment, with no hierarchical divisions between teacher and student. Classes were informal seminars on a wide variety of topics, there would be no grades, and the administration would be self-derived through voting. The first year saw seminars on:

the history and theory of jazz, classical music theory, folk singing, folk and pop song-writing, yoga, poetry, life drawing, Judaism and religious existentialism, cosmic history, the drug seminar, social journalism, a magic school, an outing society, Jungian psychology, sculpture, primitive religions, painting, films, ceramics, Confucianism, a seminar on revolution, silk-screen processing, and sensitivity training. (Zwicker, 1969, p. 43).

In the spirit of Dewey's experiential education, and Goodman's more holistic, community oriented style, Rochdale was meant to be a community of people teaching, learning and living together.⁸

The stated goal of Rochdale was to "create an academy: a place where men and women who love wisdom can pursue it under the forms and by the avenues which seem best to them" (Sharpe, 1987, p. 16). It was a major step towards an anarchistic framework of education that denied ultimate authority to any individual or group and held the sovereignty of each individual as freely and consciously participating in the egalitarian process of learning. And with all the positive and negative connotations weighing the word down, the anarchy of Rochdale emerged almost immediately. The seminars were occasionally successful – five or six hour discussions on art, philosophy, politics, and history lasting well into the night. But more often than not, seminars were poorly attended and most dissolved within a few sessions.⁹ People came and went, and

⁸ For a good overview of what Rochdale was, and what it was meant to be by many of those directly involved, see the documentary *Dream Tower*, Dir. Ron Mann, Montréal: National Film Board of Canada, 2008.

⁹ For a closer look at the anarchical form of educational aspects of Rochdale, see *Rochdale College Tapes Part I, II, III, IV*, Charaseepress.org, 2009.

without any semblance of formal structure, this played right into the experiment. A journalism student at Ryerson University (another Toronto University with a campus downtown) who lived at Rochdale called it "lousy – people decide what they want to study and then get a group together to form a seminar. They only study what they agree with, they never meet opposing views, and education degenerates into nothing more than the reinforcement of what they already think and believe" (Zwicker, 1969, p. 40). Although one student's statement should not be seen to represent the opinion of all who resided and studied there, the chaotic form of education at Rochdale differed in near direct opposition to the highly structured University system of courses, credits, and grades.

The most successful, long-standing groups to exist at Rochdale were the theatre group 'Theatre Passe Muraille' (Theatre Without Walls) and the Rochdale Daily, an internal publication that used the facilities of nearby Coach House Press on the University of Toronto campus (Mietkiewicz & Mackowycz, 1988). Meetings were continually held to help orient the educational aspects of Rochdale College, but they nearly always deteriorated into chaos, anger and comic absurdity. Despite its persistent problems, Rochdale often met problems with comedy. During administrative meetings, complaints were countered with non sequiturs, announcements were made with absurdity, and serious matters were glossed over in favour of puns, politically divisive statements, and outright lunacy. One example related to Rochdale's spirit of alternative education was the decision to issue degrees for money. These "[h]andsomely printed diplomas were offered for sale at mock rates: A Ph.D. for \$100, an M.A. for \$50, and a B.A. for \$25. In case the point was missed, a non-Ph.D. cost \$25, a non-M.A. \$50, and non-B.A. \$100" (Sharpe, 1987, p. 169). To qualify for a B.A. one had to name the first Prime Minister of Canada, for an M.A. they had to name the present Prime Minister, and to qualify for a Ph.D. students were

Dreaming of Dissent: Rochdale College and the Failed Dream of Communal Education

asked to name any Prime Minister. Initially conferred for recognized academic disciplines, they became increasingly specific and humorous as time went on. To name a few, degrees included:

Bachelor of:...Twenty-First Century Mythology...Financial Manipulations... Magical Apprenticeship, Life's Tosses and Turns...Master of: Crisis...Communication of Wrong Numbers, the Art of Caring, Body Language, Absenteeism...[and] Doctor of: Life, Philanthropy [awarded to Santa Claus]...Bedroom Engineering...Poetic Justice... Delirium...Palaeolithic Technology, Ineptitude, Failure [and, finally, a] King of: Arts degree, (Sharpe, 1987, p. 170-1).

To tell the story of Rochdale is to also talk about drugs. In the public eye, this is largely what Rochdale represented. With drugs came drug dealers, who set up shop in Rochdale, fond of its unstructured inclusivity. Thousands drifted through just to buy drugs and leave. Of the dozens of newspaper articles written about Rochdale over the years, the image of the place was often painted as a den of thieves, crooks, and juvenile delinquents. To solve the ever increasing violence and general disarray caused by the presence of drug dealers, Rochdale organized its own Rochdale Security, which may have caused as many problems as it solved. Although certainly a presence within the building, these security personnel were often more interested in aiding, rather than abetting, drug deals (Sharpe, 1987). The building itself may have made no money, but some drug dealers made hundreds of thousands of dollars selling at Rochdale. Many of the original people involved in Rochdale had moved on by 1971, but Rochdale finally closed in 1975 by an eviction enforced by Toronto police. Rochdale was rife with financial problems throughout, and never came close to making its monthly payments.

Initially supported by the liberal minded Toronto government in the late '60s, by the early '70s, due to the drugs, the violence, the chaos, the lack of money, and a number of suicides, the

focus shifted towards the total destruction of Rochdale College. The situation became so dire that, at one point, the Army was going to be called in to empty the building (Sharpe, 1987). From the early '70s to its end, the overtly educational elements of Rochdale were all but absent. But, if we keep in mind the wider perspective of education as the development of a young person's ability to act in a self-aware, reflexive, responsive manner to the fluidity of social interactions, then the educational elements of Rochdale may never have disappeared entirely. In terms of social development, experiments like Rochdale can be taken as microcosms of larger socio-cultural fabrics unfolding in all their entangled complexities. What may have principally been lacking was guidance; with a more developed program of study, and a few core seminars to orient the college, perhaps Rochdale could have been more of a College and less a media darling of disaffected young, drugs, gang violence, and countercultural stereotypes puffed up for the sensationalism newspapers seem to thrive on.

But to impose these structures goes against the whole idea. Rochdale was, above all, an experiment in living, and its original team of organizers were convinced that day-to-day living is the best education of all. Rochdale was meant to be, in the words of Professor Dennis Lee, a faculty member at the University of Toronto who was involved with Rochdale, "a system flexible enough to fit people, all kinds of people, rather than trying to make people fit a structured system...a place where people must create their own environment, make their own decisions, learn to face themselves – because the basic truth everyone must face is about himself [*sic*] – and learn to live and be complete, rounded people" (Sharpe, 1987, p. 19). That flexibility, however, was often interpreted as radical permissiveness; a place to pursue hedonistic pleasures free of the penalizing gaze of judgement outside the building.

To what extent, then, was Rochdale a success or a failure? Though difficult to dub a major success, aspects of Rochdale can serve as an alternative model. It can be seen as another way to approach the concept of education, as Dewey, Goodman, the Experimental College and Black Mountain also tried to do. As David Sharpe sums it up, "[a]t its best, Rochdale was a noble experiment" that "tested new approaches to education, creativity, and community", such that "[t]he accomplishment of Rochdale cannot be separated from its eventual destruction, and an institution that was not allowed to be self-destructive about such sweeping questions would have tested nothing at all" (1987, p. 275).

Conclusion

In keeping with the free-form educational models explored, this paper has not necessarily presented a central argument. I wish only to call attention to an attempt, nearly fifty years ago in the city of Toronto, to create an alternative structure of education in an autonomous community that, despite its problems and ultimate demise, deserves a closer look. In light of the rise of corporate capitalist Universities and the product-based model of post-secondary education, I feel it is important to take a critical stance towards a homogenizing trend. Built upon the work of theorists like Dewey and Goodman, and examples like the Experimental College and Black Mountain, Rochdale can provide a different lens through which to examine the University system. There is little recent scholarship on Rochdale College, and the more recent monographs on Black Mountain College (see Katz 2013; Diaz 2015; Molesworth 2015) focus almost entirely on the well-known affiliated artists and their work. There is a wealth of scholarship on alternative forms of education (See Holzman 1997; Hakim et al. 2000), but these texts often focus on incremental changes to the current system, re-thinking within the current socio-cultural

framework. What Rochdale College exemplifies is an attempt to think outside of the framework and to restructure the assumptions about what education is, and what it can be. Even if it is viewed as a failure – and it is difficult to see it as a complete success – Rochdale provides a window into an anarchical free-form community-oriented approach to education, a perspective that is as valuable as it is challenging and fraught with potential problems. The experiment at Rochdale College can be seen to exemplify the types of fluid, open, networked forms of teaching and learning put forth by Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* (1971), providing a model for future experiments that focus on what has worked in the past while seeking to avoid what has failed.

What seems to have worked at Rochdale – though only for the first year or two – was a small group of students and teachers that came together with a genuine desire to explore alternative ways of approaching the process of learning. Instead of separating learning into disciplinary boundaries, a cross-disciplinary format was explored, one that pursued questions about history, religion, society and culture by reaching across disciplines. The emphasis also seems to have been placed on discussion as a productive mode of learning, and although discussion continues to play a significant role in the current University system, dialogue at Rochdale was not focused on test preparation or participation grades. Instead, the pursuit of knowledge was understood to be taken for its own inherent pleasures. The extent to which this idealized format of education, proposed by Dewey, Goodman, the Experimental College, Black Mountain College and others, was successfully carried out to any significant degree at Rochdale remains in question, but the attempt itself is noteworthy.

Perhaps the best way to end is to pose a series of questions in an attempt to stimulate the kinds of free-form discussions valued by the communities of teachers and students that gathered around Rochdale College. These questions are meant to provoke reflection on the idea of post-

Dreaming of Dissent: Rochdale College and the Failed Dream of Communal Education

secondary education in our time. What is the ultimate purpose of post-secondary education in our culture? Why is University so prevalent in the normative developmental trajectory of the once 'average' but (by necessity) increasingly affluent student? How would teachers, educators, scholars of pedagogy and students frame discussions about alternative forms of education today? What would theorists, teachers and students prioritize in thinking through experimental forms of education? In addition, has the University system grown closer or father away from the idealized image of Rochdale College? Do advances in technology and interconnectivity provide fresh tools for experimental education, or do these tools only increase a sense of isolation, leading individuals further away from the types of conversational learning prized by Dewey, Goodman and Illich? And do alternative systems of education succeed only in small-scale communities drawn together in the pursuit of a common goal, or could they work in larger contexts?

I am curious how looking critically at the current status and recent developments in the University system (at least in Canada) might be helped or hindered by trying to understand places like Rochdale. Above all, I am passionately interested in the concept of education, and feel strongly that the widening of our perspective on what education can mean, and the forms it can take, will lead to a more critical, careful and panoramic view, both now and in the future.

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Dreaming of Dissent: Rochdale College and the Failed Dream of Communal Education

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