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10. ENACTING EQUALITY

Rethinking Emancipation and Adult Education with Jacques Rancière

INTRODUCTION

The organization of much adult education, whether it be vocational, further, community, higher or civic education, is often underpinned by liberal-humanist ideals associated with the Enlightenment. In this tradition, education is understood as *the means* for providing a way out of darkness and ignorance and this is closely linked with the notion that education emancipates. In other words, education, whether it takes place in universities, community groups, or workplaces is understood as contributing to the ongoing march of social progress and it does this through producing more knowledgeable individuals and societies. To this end, critical theory has been a key resource for adult educators interested in equality, democracy and emancipation as it draws attention to power and its relation to oppression.

However, the emancipatory ideals of education have increasingly come under attack, along with the hope that critical theory will contribute to progressive social change (e.g., Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Cooper, 2014; Kompridis, 2006; Latour, 2004). Increasing diversity and complexity in society has resulted in a less unified understanding around what constitutes progressive social change and transformation (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017), and the notion of a universal truth seems much less certain. At a time when there is a growing skepticism towards experts and elites, as seen in the current exploitation of ‘post-truth’ politics by the populist right (Friedman, 2017; Hull, 2018; Runciman, 2016); with inequality and xenophobia on the rise in many countries (Dorling, 2015; Winkler, 2017); and the issue of global warming rolling on in a seemingly unrestrained way (Cox, 2018; Nuccitelli, 2018) do we, as Wildemeersch (2014, p. 823) asks, need to “redefine what critical theories and practices are about?” And if so, what other approaches might be possible for those interested in equality, democracy and emancipation?

One theorist questioning widely shared assumptions about emancipation is Jacques Rancière. Rancière (1991, p. 7) proposes that conceiving equality and democracy as the *end* goal of education contributes to ‘stultification’ rather than emancipation. There is a growing scholarship in the field of education on the work of Rancière, with much of this literature examining the alternative conception of emancipation he provides and exploring the implications for education (e.g., Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Galloway, 2012; Harman, 2017a; Pelletier, 2009; Simons & Masschelein, 2010).

This chapter contributes to this scholarship by thinking with Rancière to explore the possibilities for doing adult education and research. In the first part of the chapter, Rancière's alternative conception of emancipation is introduced. In the second part the possibilities for doing and researching adult education using Rancierian concepts are explored.

AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTION OF EMANCIPATION

For many adult educators, it could be said that effecting social change and transformation is our *raison d'être* (e.g., Dewey, 1966; Tawney, 1931; Williams, 1965), and this is often closely linked with an emancipatory ideal of education embedded in Enlightenment thinking. Even more radical perspectives on adult education, which have as their goal the more equal distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society, tend to be underpinned by an understanding that (critical) education emancipates (e.g., Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Mayo, 2015). Indeed, it could be said that the hope of the critical tradition is that a *better understanding* of how power *really* works will lead to the mobilization of oppressed groups in their struggle for emancipation. Much of this work is underpinned by the Marxist notion of false consciousness and, from this perspective, a better understanding of oppression is facilitated by a 'knower' who understands the true operation of power (Biesta, 2010; Breuing, 2011). In other words, one is *led* to emancipation by the critical educator/political theorist.

However, Rancière (1981, p. 7) points out that the delay embedded in such "explicatory" pedagogic practices produces "stultification" and is constituted by a relation of dependence rather than emancipation. And nowhere is this more evident than in the academy, where 'the teacher' is positioned as "the knower" and students as "the novice". Rancière argues that this particular ordering of relations works to produce an ongoing temporal delay with an underlying assumption that just a little more knowledge and the student will eventually become "the knower". He describes the assumption that the explicatory practices of the teacher are emancipatory as "the pedagogical myth" with the problem being: "The pedagogical myth divides the world into two. It says there is an inferior intelligence and a superior one" (1991, p. 7). Furthermore, using the example of continuing education in the late 1800s, he discusses the institutionalization of equality in education, whereby the task of education was "making an equal society out of unequal men" (p. 133).

Rancière also proposes that the same hierarchical ordering of intelligence underpins much critical theory. Indeed, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* can be read as a thinly veiled critique of the public intellectual who contributes to the ongoing separation of knowledge into higher and lower orders by revealing the truth of oppression (Ross, 1991). These practices divide the world into two: those who know and those who are ignorant and oppressed; and assume the latter need to be led by 'the knower' in the task of recognizing their own oppression before they can be emancipated. In other words, a higher-level knowledge is understood as providing

a pathway to freedom and this is achieved through revealing the truth of oppression (and inequality). For Rancière, this leads to a “pedagogicized” society” (1991, p. 130) and reinforces inequality.

There are many similarities between Rancière’s critique of the public intellectual and Freire’s work on critical pedagogy (1996), where dialogic and participatory techniques are the preferred pedagogic approach. Both draw attention to active knowers and the importance of non-hierarchical relations between teachers and students. Furthermore, Freire’s critique of a “narrative” element in much pedagogy (1996, p. 71), is very similar to Rancière’s critique of explicatory practices. However, for Freire, the educational experience provides the opportunity for the oppressed to become conscious of the previously hidden operation of power and this is the first stage in achieving emancipation. This leads Bingham and Biesta (2010) to contend that implicit in this view is the assumption that emancipation (and equality) can be achieved only after the truth of oppression and its relation to power is revealed.

In contrast, Rancière argues that rather than thinking about emancipation as a goal to be reached in the future, which produces inequality in the present, equality must be enacted in the here and now. The “circle of emancipation must be *begun*” (1991, p. 16, author’s emphasis) and this entails the presupposition and verification of an “equality of intelligence” (p. 38). For Rancière, an equality of intelligence assumes the common capacity to “invent objects, stories and arguments” (2014, p. 279) and this assumption provides the starting point for further action. There can be no temporal delay as equality and emancipation is something one enacts in the present. It is an act rather than a possession. Moreover, it must be demanded rather than waiting for it to be given as the latter incorporates a temporal delay, which produces inequality. And because it is an act (rather than a possession), equality needs to be constantly remade. It must be made and remade in order for it to be sustained.

And this was the great discovery made by Jacotot, the protagonist in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière, 1991). In telling the story of Jacotot and his accidental discovery of the principles of ‘universal teaching’, Rancière directs attention to the performativity of pedagogic practices (Pelletier, 2009). When Jacotot commenced teaching at the University of Louvain in the early 1800s, he was unable to pass on his knowledge of his subject to his students as he could not speak Flemish. Out of necessity, he used a bilingual copy of a book in his classes, the *Telemaque*, and to his surprise this method of teaching was extremely effective. This experience led Jacotot to realize that we *all* have the common capacity to learn by experimentation and “groping blindly” and that this is made possible by an “equality of intelligence”. There is not a higher and lower order of intelligence, rather, the scientist and the artisan learn in the same way. For both it is a question of “observing, comparing and combining, of making and noticing how one has done it” (p. 36). And when Jacotot made this discovery:

There was nothing else to do but to persist in indicating the extravagant path that consists in seizing in every sentence, in every act, the side of equality.

Equality was not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a supposition to maintain in every circumstance. Never would truth speak up for it. Never would equality exist except in its verification and at the price of being verified always and everywhere. (p. 138)

A key concept introduced by Rancière is his notion of “the distribution of the sensible” and an aesthetic dimension of politics (2004). The distribution of the sensible is the ordering of the social (Rancière refers to this as the “police order”), which creates divisions in terms of what is sayable and not sayable, what is visible and not visible, and what can be heard and what is unable to be heard. It is in this sense that Rancière draws attention to the ontological dimension of politics and questions ‘what is able to exist?’ in a particular ordering of the social. Who and what can (and cannot) be seen, heard, listened to, thought about, named? For Rancière politics involves reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible and this is achieved when the previously excluded demand equality and become part of the commons. Directing attention to equality in the here and now is a very different political strategy to that available in certain versions of critical theory, which focus on the relationship between oppression and the hidden operation of power and, as I propose below, this provides great possibility for adult educators.

However, not all adult education theorists, nor all political theorists, agree with Rancière’s political strategy. For example, Alhadeff-Jones (2017), who is interested in how education might contribute to sustaining emancipation, sees Rancière’s focus on the ongoing need to enact equality in the present as a limitation rather than a strength. However, the notion of achieving sustained emancipation implies a social ordering without hierarchy, which seems unlikely. Rather, Rancière (2017, unpaged) speaks of equality as a “world in the making”. It is “a world born of specific breaches in the dominant commonsense, of interruptions of the ‘normal’ way of the world”. In other words, the present world of hierarchy provides the ‘stage’ where the worlds of inequality and equality are able to meet. Rancière’s focus on performativity and the need for the *ongoing* enacting of equality in order for it to be sustained is the great possibility offered by this approach. This strategy not only makes emancipation in the present possible, it makes it a necessity – there can be no temporal delay, no deferral. This is a political project in which all adult educators can and must take part.

POSSIBILITIES FOR DOING ADULT EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

So, what might enacting equality in the present actually look like in adult education? Again, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* provides a useful guide. Rancière is not suggesting a world without teachers, rather he proposes a world without explication (Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Wildemeersch, 2014). A world where there is no splitting the common capacity to think and speak and create stories into a world which assumes a higher and lower order of intelligence. This requires the teacher to be ‘ignorant’. In other words, the ignorant schoolmaster does not teach their knowledge to students.

Rather, by leaving their knowledge out of the pedagogic relation, the ‘knower’ – ‘not knower’ relationship of explicatory pedagogy is able to be reconfigured.

A key concept for Rancière is the notion of aesthetic experience (2006, 2014). This is a form of engagement which does not involve a hierarchical relation and enables the appearance of something new. An important mechanism for removing hierarchy from the relationship is by providing a setting where students engage with texts (in the broadest sense of the word). This might include books but it could also include theatre, music, dance, films, poetry, artwork, television and other cultural objects. For example, when reading a book, one reads and makes their own interpretation of the text. The student uses their own intelligence to interpret the book and thus the book provides “the egalitarian intellectual link” (1991, p. 13). The notion of translation is key here and the capacity, which Rancière argues is common to all humans, to perceive, make connections and create meaning. Furthermore, the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ does not verify what the student has found. No feedback is provided on the student’s interpretation, rather the ignorant schoolmaster verifies: “that the student has searched” and “has paid attention” (p. 31). The ignorant schoolmaster will ask: “what do you think about it?” (p. 36). The purpose is to encourage students to be attentive and, to this end, practices such as searching, experimenting, researching and storytelling are employed. The goal is to extend ‘moments of equality’ through its enactment (Rancière, 2017).

Rancière provides many examples in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* of aesthetic experience, including the enactment of equality in painting (p. 65) and poetry (p. 67). In a section titled *The Community of Equals* (p. 71) he describes an emancipated community as “a society of artists” which:

... would repudiate the division between those who know and those who don’t, between those who possess or don’t possess the property of intelligence. It would only know minds in action: people who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone’.

Wildemeersch (2014) further explores the notion of aesthetic experience and what it offers to adult educators drawing on Rancière’s notion of ‘the emancipated spectator’ (2009). In engaging with an artwork (but it could be theatre or music or television), the spectator is not passive. Instead, the spectator provides an interpretation of the artwork and this engagement is without hierarchy. The painter or sculptor does not tell the spectator how the work should be interpreted. The interpretation is ‘active’ and involves the translation and appropriation of the artist’s story and making it one’s own. An equality of intelligence is enacted in this relationship where neither the intelligence of the artist nor the intelligence of the spectator dominates.

Rancière (and Wildemeersch) are both interested in the creation of democratic moments, which provide the opportunity to experience equality: “One need only learn how to be equal men in an unequal society” (1991, p. 133, my emphasis).

This involves transgressing boundaries (or social positionings), including the ongoing crossing of occupational and disciplinary boundaries, through a process of ‘disidentification’ and a refusal to take up a particular social position that has been allocated. It is transgression which enables the ‘distribution of the sensible’ to be reconfigured:

It is thus impossible for shoemakers just to make shoes, that they not also be, in their manner, grammarians, moralists, or physicists. (Rancière, 1991, p. 34)

The above text could be applied to other occupations. For example, it is impossible for hairdressers not to be psychologists, carers and scientists; it is impossible for cooks not to be chemists, artists and herbalists; and so on. This way of understanding the world disrupts the notion of a linear view of progress and the associated divisions produced by this way of thinking:

... as long as peasants and artisans form moral, mathematical, or physical notions based on their environmental routine or their chance encounters, the reasoned march of progress will be doubly at risk: slowed down by men [sic] of routine and superstition, or disrupted by the haste of violent men [sic]. (Rancière, 1991, p. 34)

Following Rancière, the adult educator creates the space for democratic moments but this is not about achieving consensus in the group, rather dissensus (Rancière, 2010). Rather than a community of shared practice and meaning, the enactment of equality contributes to “the invention of specific moments where the very landscape of the perceptible, thinkable, doable is radically reframed” (Rancière, 2017, unpaged) and a community of difference is produced. The removal of established boundaries and hierarchies results in variation and hybridity and the production of new meanings and subjectivities (Lewis, 2009). In other words, what was not previously able to exist is now able to appear.

Furthermore, rather than research approaches which attempt to reveal the truth of oppression, Rancière suggests a very different political strategy. Instead of attempting to mobilize action for emancipation in the future, a common equality of intelligence should be verified in research accounts. This would include drawing attention to democratic moments where enacting equality disrupts the ‘normal’ world of hierarchy with its ongoing separation of the world into a ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ order of intelligence. For example, Rancière’s notion of disidentification, which is the refusal to take up allocated social positions, is useful for researching learning in and through everyday workplace practices (Harman, 2017b). Rather than accounts which reinforce a view of knowing (and accepting) one’s place, the crossing of occupational, disciplinary, temporal, geographic and sensory boundaries at work should be verified and documented. These accounts verify the new modes of subjectivity brought into effect through transgression. This could entail the refusal to take up particular gendered or classed subject positions associated with occupations,

for example nurses as carer, sweetheart and angel; teacher as knower, judge and expert; cleaners as low skilled; and so on.

For Rancière, the refusal to be positioned provides an opportunity for the enactment of equality and a reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible. This is where the world of inequality and the world of equality are able to meet on the same stage. For example, the hierarchical organization of most workplaces into ‘the manager’ and ‘the managed’ and the inherent separation of a higher and lower order intelligence this entails, provides an ideal site for verifying the moments when these boundaries are crossed and equality is enacted. Rancière provides an example of transgressive boundary crossing in *The Nights of Labor* (1989) where workers, during the 1830 revolution in France, transgressed temporal and occupational boundaries to produce worker-run newspapers, letters, journals, and worker-poetry. Rather than sleeping during the night and restoring their bodies for a full day of labour, these worker-intellectuals demanded equality by engaging in intellectual pursuits and refusing to be positioned simply as ‘workers’. While some political theorists criticize Rancière’s approach as romantic (e.g. McNay, 2014), the *verification* of the enactment of a utopian vision in the present is precisely his point. And this point has been taken up and explored by various authors (e.g., Kompridis, 2014; Cooper, 2014).

A focus on aesthetic experience and the notion of non-hierarchical engagement opens up pretty much everything in terms of exploring adult learning as the boundaries embedded in the division of the world into ‘the knower’ – ‘the ignorant’ binary begin to crumble and other ways of knowing are able to appear (Clover, 2010; Manicom & Walters, 2012; Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2012). For example, in contrast to the prevailing focus on reflection on experience in workplace pedagogies, which could be understood as providing a particular mode of ‘doing’ experience that embeds hierarchy (Bradbury et al., 2009; Michelson, 1996), an exploration of experience and how it is ‘made up’, including the ways different senses are connected with experience, opens up a vast terrain to explore. This approach contributes to more expansive accounts of learning and experience rather than assuming learning only takes place in particular spaces and at particular times (e.g. Ruitenberg, 2012). Further, if learning is reconfigured as moments where equality is experienced this presents possibilities which are not usually documented in the literature on learning at work (Harman, 2016, 2017b). If the exploration of aesthetic engagement is incorporated as an approach to researching learning, for example, the ways we engage with books, films, artworks (and so on) and the ways these are translated and made into one’s own story (Jarvis, 2018), the possibilities are vast. The focus shifts to the verification of equality and documenting the ways experimentation and creativity contribute to the appearance of the new. Furthermore, the very separation of adult education practice and adult education research is challenged in this approach.

THE FRAGILITY OF EQUALITY (BUT ALSO THE FRAGILITY OF INEQUALITY)

In summary, Rancière points to two very different political strategies for achieving emancipation and both are completely intertwined with pedagogic and research practices. The first is the view underpinning many critical approaches in adult education where it is believed that revealing the truth of inequality in the present will lead to equality in the future. This is the world of explication. An alternative is enacting equality in the present. Rancière insists on the latter approach as the former results in the ongoing enactment of inequality in the present in order to achieve emancipation in the future. In drawing attention to the performative function of pedagogic practices, Rancière enables us to rethink how we might do adult education. Adult educators are intricately entwined in ontological politics and our pedagogic practices are absolutely integral to achieving equality.

While the separation of the world into higher and lower orders of intelligence by way of explicatory pedagogy is completely embedded in the ‘pedagogicized’ society, the fact that inequality also needs to be enacted to remain durable provides great possibility. Just as equality is fragile, so too is inequality, as both must be enacted. The ubiquity of the ‘pedagogicized’ society means that there are multiple points (or nodes) for educators to enact equality. And this means adult educators do not need to wait for emancipation in the future, there is no need to defer. Instead, we must act now so the “circle of emancipation can be begun”.

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