

The emancipated classroom

David Ridley describes a lesson in Rancierean pedagogy.

I was asked by my colleague, Stephen Cowden, who runs a day-long introduction to critical pedagogy for his Social Work BA and MA students at Coventry University (with Gurnam Singh), whether I would like to offer a session on Jacques Ranciere on the 1st March (2016). Ranciere is a contemporary French critical theorist who Stephen and I have been discussing with interest, and we plan to publish a co-edited book on the subject of Ranciere and Education in the near future.

Ranciere's work centres on a *critique* of pedagogy, in particular what he calls the method of 'explication'. Explication is the approach to pedagogy in respect to which a teacher assumes that their job is to lead students to a level of adequate understanding, a process which is not possible without the guidance of the teacher. In its most conservative form, explication takes the form of 'transmission', in which the student is conceived as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge. Ranciere claims that even well-meaning teachers engage in 'explication', as, even when it is accepted that student *can know* and learn for themselves, the assumption remains that they must be taught the right way of *approaching* knowledge so that they will achieve the 'correct' understanding.

Ranciere argues that these explicative forms of pedagogy only serve to reinforce a 'division of the sensible' – the division between those that have the ability to know and those that don't (a division going back to Plato, who created a utopian class system based on those that work with their minds and are capable of ruling, the philosopher kings, and those that work with their hands who can never be philosophers, slaves, serfs and women). Explication, therefore, ensures the teacher's authority and the student's domination. An emancipatory pedagogy, on the other hand, begins with an assumption of

radical equality: that all people are equal and capable of knowing. Instead of 'explicating' a theory of emancipatory pedagogy, Ranciere recounts the story of Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840), a French teacher and educational philosopher, who discovered that one doesn't need to know in order to teach. For Jacotot, an emancipatory teacher does not explain, but rather sets up a situation in which the student is 'forced' (or at least strongly motivated) to teach themselves.

The idea that I had was to set up such a learning situation for the Social Work students so that they could learn for themselves the 'truth' of Ranciere's critique of pedagogy. In my own teaching at Coventry University (where I am a Lecturer in Media Theory), I do not use the traditional lecture-seminar format at all if I can help it, instead opting for a workshop approach where students are given a series of texts and asked to take it in turns to introduce these texts through group presentations. Students are also asked to create their own questions related to these texts for subsequent discussion. This seems to me to be exactly the kind of pedagogy that Ranciere is suggesting: rejecting the need for explication in favour of a community of learning that, on the one hand, depends on solidarity between students (as they will only learn what each brings to the workshop); and, on the other, encourages (if not forces) students to make their own minds up about the material they are given.

For the Social Work students I produced a reading booklet with two texts: (1) an abridged version of Adorno and Horkheimer's *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* essay (sourced from marxists.org); and (2) the first chapter from Ranciere's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (titled 'An Intellectual Adventure'). I chose the Adorno and Horkheimer essay as an *example* of the method of

explication, where the traditional theorist explains to people that they are being manipulated without even realising, through the 'culture industry'. I had previously used this text in a Media Theory workshop, and realised myself the truth of Ranciere's argument: no matter what the students said in response to the 'culture industry thesis' ('but I feel like I have a choice!'), the theorist always has an answer ('this choice is an illusion, a choice between forms of alienation', 'it is choice itself that you are being manipulated into believing in' etc). In what could be called a 'meta' way, I wanted the Social Work students to also experience Ranciere's argument, so that the 'lesson' of Rancierean critical pedagogy is not the content (which would involve 'explication'), but the process of self-discovery.

The 'lesson' was structured around three distinct stages of discussion, with the following questions (given to students at the beginning):

**Part 1: The Culture Industry:
Enlightenment as Mass Deception**

1. What is Horkheimer and Adorno's argument concerning the 'culture industry?' (Perhaps think about and discuss what everyone thinks they mean by this concept.)
2. What do you think about this argument? Do you agree? Why / why not?
3. How does this text / argument make you feel?

**Part 2: The Ignorant Schoolmaster:
Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation**

1. What is Jacotot's method of 'universal teaching'?
2. Why is Ranciere recounting the story of an obscure 18th/19th century educator?
3. What are the implications for your own practice?

**Part 3: Reflection on the emancipated
classroom: a lesson in Rancierean pedagogy**

1. What did you think of this learning experience? Was it like other learning experiences you have had? If not, why not?
2. Is there still a place for 'explication' (ie lectures, more traditional forms of teaching)?
3. Do you even need a teacher?

Joining some of the discussions during Part 1, it was clear that students really 'got' the culture industry thesis, despite this being presented by Adorno and Horkheimer in the most dense, obtuse and repetitive prose (a fact students were keen to point out!). The thesis was also related by students to contemporary manifestations of the culture industry; the co-existence with and co-dependence of cultural forms with larger capitalist structures was very clear to students. For example, Apple was identified as the culture-industrial corporation par excellence: ubiquitous within cultural life, Apple products not only dominated the market, they also had an influence over our identities (are you an Apple or a Samsung person?). The domination of cultural brands generally encouraged homogeneity and gave the illusion of choice, which is in fact a choice between similar forms of consumption.

When asked (during plenary discussion) how the culture industry thesis made them *feel*, many students said that they felt depressed and had a sense of despair ('it's too late to change things now', 'we can't do anything'). Other students argued that the text made them more conscious of the ways in which they were being manipulated and exploited as part of everyday life. One student put forward the interesting counter-argument that 'ignorance is bliss', that if you could ignore or forget that you are not in control, the culture industry thesis can be read as a strange kind of 'utopia' (rather than a 'dystopia'). But generally it was agreed that Adorno and Horkheimer offer no solutions, and make no attempt to address the central question of emancipation: 'What possibilities are there for change?'

Deeply

After a short break, discussion moved on to Part 2 and Ranciere. Again, students understood the text quickly and deeply (in the sense of having a personal relation to its meaning). In the plenary discussion it was agreed that Ranciere (through Jacotot) was arguing that 'anyone can learn anything', the positivity of Ranciere's position starkly apparent after the previous text. This generalisation was soon qualified with 'if people are given the opportunity' and that appropriate levels of motivation are needed. Some students concluded that Ranciere was perhaps a little idealistic, and that his 'universal teaching' assumed a general level of what Pierre Bourdieu would call 'cultural capital'. But getting right to the heart of Ranciere's critique of pedagogy, one group pointed out that people are often classified into those that *can* learn (those with the potential to do well, take their A-levels or even go

on to university) and those that are destined to be stuck in precarious work not 'requiring' advanced education.

The value of Ranciere's argument, therefore, is to remind us that each person is equally capable and has as much potential as any other human being. This point was discussed in terms of 'classification', a practice particularly relevant for social work, as individuals and families are often 'written off' before a social worker even makes contact, either through documentation read before a case is approached, or through discussions with other social workers. In everyday social work practice, individuals and families are often seen as 'difficult', 'hopeless cases' or 'disengaged'. There was an interesting related discussion regarding people with 'learning difficulties', and whether the existence of mental disabilities or cognitive disorders undermines Ranciere's arguments about radical equality. Again, it was agreed that Ranciere encourages us to see the intellectual capacity in all of us, irrespective of how and whether or not this capacity is achieved or expressed.

In the final reflective stage of discussion, students argued that critical pedagogy is *discouraged* in contemporary higher education. They pointed out that the university 'polices' the motivation to learn through disciplinary structures such as attendance registers (which are themselves highly punitive, with the threat of punishment or Tier 4 visa withdrawal in some cases) and the cost of failure (with tuition fees and loans pushing this cost towards an average

£24k in total). Although this artificial motivation is sometimes useful, and explication appropriate for some 'fact-based' or technical subjects, the Rancierean approach they had experienced was far better for achieving *understanding*. Interestingly, it was agreed that though in principle they could learn on their own, and much of being a student at university involved such 'independent study', being able to discuss the ideas and what they thought about the texts with other students was invaluable.

At the end I thanked the students and told them that this positive experience reinforced my belief, following Ranciere, that you don't need to explicate to teach and that all students are equally intelligent. Often lecturers feel that students won't 'get it' or won't read what they are given, are lazy or distracted, and are not ready for the 'hard stuff'. Stephen (with great integrity!) confessed that he was worried that the texts might have been too challenging for his students, who weren't used to dealing with critical theory. However, experiencing the 'truth' of Rancierean pedagogy himself, he realised that he had underestimated his students. As a teacher you merely prove your own prejudices when you assume, and when you teach according to the *practice* of radical equality, you will be consistently amazed and surprised by students.

If you would like to discuss the Rancierean approach to critical pedagogy outlined above, or try it out for yourself (I can send you the reading booklet) please contact me: ab1955@coventry.ac.uk.

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