

Shared Learning and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*

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INTRODUCTION: TWO CONFLICTING DESIRES

This essay has its origin in two conflicting desires. The first is my desire to examine and protect the shared space and time of the school. My understanding of school and its value owes much to Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons's book, *In Defence of the School*.¹ Inspired by their analyses, I see the school's dimension of sharing to be its most precious characteristic. In school, students learn in a shared space — the school is a structure that enables and requires spatial coexistence. Further, in its relation to tradition, the school also enables a sharing of time, bringing the past into contact with the present, and opening this present up to a future to come. Learning in the school is thus a shared learning that comes about through a certain sharing of space and of time. Otherwise put, there is a fundamental difference between the learning that occurs in the school and the learning that occurs when one is alone. It may be that more learning occurs in our lives when we are alone. But my interest in this essay lies not with the quantity but with a certain quality or process of learning, namely that shared process that occurs in the school.

As has been well documented, there are forces today threatening this experience of shared learning. Many of the forces rendering education a corporate affair are forces of individualization, and this works both spatially and temporally. For example, in their most common expression, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) explicitly elide spatial coexistence in learning. They are designed for students to learn primarily on their own, in a one-to-one relationship with recorded lectures. Similarly, the increasing emphasis on employable skills cuts the educational present from its inherited past. The point here is not to engage and keep alive the tradition of learning from the past, with all the complications of transformation and destruction that this involves. Rather, learning is focused on the future of the individual student, specifically on her future employment, and she shares this future with nobody else — she alone is responsible for her future success or failure. Whether deliberately or not, practices such as these promote individual learning, preventing learning from being a shared experience.

The second desire motivating this essay is to support and develop the profound insights contained in Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.² Reading this book challenged many of my assumptions about teaching and learning, and I found myself agreeing with many of the claims advanced in its descriptions of nineteenth-century educator Joseph Jacotot's method — that all learning involves teaching oneself, that everyone possesses equal intelligence, and that standard approaches to teaching perpetuate existing unjust social structures in a very specific way. While I have yet to fully translate my agreement with *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* into my practice, and while it contains certain claims and prescriptions that I may never embrace, the desire to make this translation remains strong.

Why, then, do these two desires — the one for shared learning, the other for translating into my teaching the claims of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* — conflict? They conflict because the claims of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* seem fundamentally opposed to the school's shared space and time. Rancière narrates the rise and fall of Jacotot's method, and its fall is tied directly to its inability to be contained within an institutional structure. Indeed, the shared space of the school seems to demand the very inequality to which Jacotot is opposed. Rancière insists that gathering students on the same path of learning causes them to believe that they are inferior in intelligence. Similarly, the school's sharing of time also promotes inequality, insofar as the schoolmaster uses a knowledge of the past to lead students to engage with the tradition that precedes them. Here, too, students absorb a lesson of inferiority, that they are of lesser intelligence than their knowledgeable teacher and the great minds of the past. Thus, the school makes possible an experience of shared learning that seems to perpetuate the very inequality *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is against.

This tension is what my essay seeks to resolve. I aim to reconcile my desires and find a way in which the shared learning of the school can sit comfortably with the claims of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.³

INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS IN *THE IGNORANT SCHOOLMASTER*

To begin, I will examine the relations between individuals and groups articulated in Rancière's book. In Jacotot's method — named “universal teaching”⁴ — the teacher-student relation holds between individuals. The teacher and the student possess an equality of intelligence and an equality of ignorance. Being ignorant, the teacher transmits no knowledge to the student. Rather, the teacher is to dominate the will of the student, to force her to pay attention to and so learn from the object being studied. If successful, this relation results in the emancipation of the student. The student realizes that, through her will, she can exercise her intelligence to learn from the object. She is thus equal in intelligence to all other human beings.

This emphasis on the individual remains unchanged in groups where learning takes place. To take the narrative's founding event, Jacotot first learned of his method when asked by a group of Flemish students to teach them what he knew. Not knowing Flemish, and they not knowing French, he told them through an interpreter to learn the French text of a bilingual edition of *Télémaque*. Jacotot thus addressed them as a group. But there are many ways to constitute a group. Here, it was formed by a collection of disparate individuals, whose sharing of space was irrelevant to their experience. On Rancière's telling, the class as a whole was structured as a one-to-many relation, Jacotot to the students, formed by the addition of many one-to-one relations, Jacotot to each student. This relation produced further one-to-one relations, between each student and the book, such that collectively they formed a many-to-one relation, the students to the book. But, at each stage, when they related to Jacotot and when they related to the book, being in a group did not seem to matter in the process. In other words, what is missing from this picture are relations among students, or a vision of the class structured as a many-to-many relation.⁵

This primacy of the individual dominates what follows. Rancière writes, for example, that each individual's intelligence “is indivisible, without community, without

division. It cannot, therefore, belong to any group, for then it would no longer belong to the individual. We must therefore conclude that intelligence is only in individuals, that it is not in their *union*.⁷⁶ And even while some of the book's assertions point to a kind of community of the emancipated, this community is never homogenous or a unit. It is constituted by separation, not fusion — "What brings *people* together, what unites them, is nonaggregation.... People are united because they are people, that is to say, *distant* beings."⁷⁷ Across this distance, people relate to one another by expressing their intelligence, and, in this way, there might be a "community of equals."⁷⁸ But it remains throughout an aggregate of more basic one-to-one relations.

At the beginning of this essay, I referred to two kinds of sharing — across space and across time — and, thus far, I have only discussed the first, with two individuals present together in the same space. What, then, can we say of time? Here, the teacher's ignorance shows its importance. Consider, first, the opposite case, where a student learns from a knowledgeable teacher. Such a teacher guides the student's relation to the past — the student learns from the teacher what to receive from the past, and how this past should be received or understood. The teacher thus both directs the student to past knowledge and speaks on this past's behalf. Similarly, the teacher directs the student's relation to the future. She sets the goals towards which the student strives, the educational outcomes that the student ought to achieve. Under standard models of teaching, a certain sharing across time therefore takes place. But it does so under the teacher's control.

In Jacotot's method, the teacher's ignorance quickly removes her from the student's relation to time. The teacher does provide the student with the object of knowledge, which arrives from the past, however recent it might be. But the student studies this object on her own, without the teacher's mediation. From this first point of contact with something from the past, the student may branch out, encountering other elements, and, in thus constructing her own tradition, inherit from the past. Through this inheritance, a future is opened up for the student. But, in contrast to traditional methods, it is a future she projects all on her own, without the prior guidance of the teacher. Temporal coexistence is thus formed by the student free from the teacher's influence — the student alone engages with both past and future. This means that, similar to space, in universal teaching's sharing across time the individual is primary in the learning that takes place.

We can thus see that on both axes of learning, of space and of time, the individual is central to universal teaching. Now, this emphasis on the individual need not be a problem as such. Individualism in itself is not something to always oppose. In Jacotot's case, I would argue that the individuality promoted is not reducible, for example, to the kind of economic individualism I mentioned earlier, which we see dominating higher education today.⁹ Nonetheless, it is the case that, because of this insistence on the individual, there is no place within universal teaching for the shared learning of the school I also want to support. So, my question is, must this be the case? Is the collectivity that the school promotes really antithetical to Jacotot's teaching?

INSCRIBING SHARED LEARNING INTO UNIVERSAL TEACHING

It is to this question that I now turn, offering a suggestion for how to inscribe shared learning into the framework of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. But I should first note that Rancière himself expresses dissatisfaction with Jacotot's emphasis on the individual. In *Disagreement*, Rancière notes that, for Jacotot, the "always one-off act of equality cannot consist in any form of social bond whatsoever."¹⁰ But he breaks with Jacotot and argues that there can indeed be a social and political logic of emancipation. This arises in the moment of contact between the existing political order (the "police order") and the collective claim of equality of those it excludes, achieved "by uniting in the name of whatever social group the pure empty quality of equality between anyone whatsoever [*l'égalité de n'importe qui avec n'importe qui*], and by superimposing over the police order that structures the community another community that only exists through and for the conflict."¹¹ It is thus, precisely as a community of equals, that the emancipated can have a political impact. In this way, *Disagreement* attempts to overcome in the sphere of collective political action the limitations of Jacotot's individualism while preserving his central insight into the equality of intelligence.¹²

Similarly, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière develops in a different context his vision of an emancipated community. Early in this book, the statements concerning this community are very much like those found in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and so remain, I would argue, based on one-to-one relations. Rancière writes, for example, that the "collective power shared by spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body or from some specific form of interactivity. It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other."¹³ But, as his analysis develops, Rancière articulates an understanding of collectivity that builds on the work of *Disagreement*: "Collective understanding of emancipation is ... the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus. It is the employment of the capacity of anyone whatsoever [*la capacité de n'importe qui*], of the quality of human beings without qualities."¹⁴ Here, Rancière emphasizes the collective dimension of emancipation, going beyond a simple one-to-one relation.

More broadly, reflecting on his oeuvre as a whole in the recent book-length interview, *La Méthode de L'égalité*, Rancière states that his emphasis on the spatial is motivated by an understanding of space "as a medium of distribution but also of coexistence."¹⁵ Indeed, this concern is inscribed in his key phrase "*le partage du sensible*." Various translations as the "distribution of the sensible" or "the division of the sensible," it could also be rendered as "the sharing of the sensible," which would make more apparent the aspect of collectivity.¹⁶ Further, this attention to the spatial does not mean that Rancière intends to leave time behind, and he calls for a "rethinking of time as coexistence," arguing that "the concept of time is completely central in my work, but it is the thought of time as the division between antagonistic temporalities."¹⁷

Finally, in a short piece from 1988, “Ecole, production, égalité,” Rancière explicitly names the “school-form [*forme-école*]” as the “place of equality par excellence.” It is a space of free time, which takes some of the wealth from the unequal world of work and production to constitute “an egalitarian space-time.”¹⁸ Rancière does not go on to examine how the school-form constitutes this egalitarian space-time, with the rest of the article instead describing the history of the school’s institution as a failure to bring this about. But this does suggest that he sees the possibility of equality existing in the school’s space-time.

However, even as Rancière’s own work after *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* involves a sustained effort to think Jacotot’s equality collectively in a political register, his path does not coincide with the one I want to follow. For the collectivity theorized does not lead to the exploration of an interaction *within* groups of learning. Instead, after *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière’s focus is on the encounter between the emancipated and the existing order, shifting away from education to look at broader political practice. Even in writings where education is more prominent, such as in “École, production, égalité,” *The Emancipated Spectator*, and *Hatred of Democracy*, it is part of a more comprehensive diagnosis and rethinking of inequality, and not the text’s central preoccupation. This is, of course, not a criticism of Rancière, but rather an acknowledgement of our different aims.

Nonetheless, despite this difference, Rancière’s articulation of his own theory does contain one element crucial to my own goal. This is his emphasis, found throughout his work and reiterated in two citations that I have just given, that the equality presupposed is between “anyone whatsoever [*n’importe qui*].” This requirement is key to inscribing an experience of shared learning into universal teaching, for a one-to-one relation between student and teacher is insufficient for demonstrating the equality of “anyone whatsoever.” At best, it shows the equality of the student with the teacher. But the latter, insofar as she occupies a special position in the system, is not just anyone whatsoever. The realization of emancipation instead requires a particular time and space, one in which students encounter a plurality of others. And, as Masschelein and Simons argue persuasively in *In Defence of the School*, drawing on ideas from Hannah Arendt, a central feature of the school is the way it isolates students from the social world, cutting them off from their backgrounds and so allowing them to renew a common world together.¹⁹ It is thus in their contact with each other — more than with their teacher — that students will encounter anyone whatsoever. That is to say, universal teaching requires the time and space of the school.

Shared learning therefore would not be a barrier to universal teaching’s emancipatory goal. It would, instead, be key to its realization. But I am also aware that I have said very little about what shared learning might be in concrete terms. In what, then, might shared learning consist? Thinking first in terms of space, we need to conceive of the class beyond the one-to-many relation — which, as I have argued, is just the aggregate of many one-to-one relations — promoted in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. The class must be a many-to-many relation, where students engage not just with the teacher, and not just with the book, but also with each other. I have

two suggestions for how this might be achieved. The first is to recognize the fact that students can and do learn from each other's learning. This is not simply to say that students learn from each other, in the sense of learning from the information that each contributes. This they can do, for they can treat each other like a book, just as Rancière notes that students can learn from the explication of a knowledgeable teacher.²⁰ More than this, I am suggesting that students can study the way that others study, pay attention to the way others pay attention, watch the way others interact with both their teacher and the text. For, if Jacotot is right that learning is fundamentally a matter of attention, experiment, and trial and error — and I think he is — we have much to learn from the way others learn. This is in part so we can learn when they get things right, since they pursue paths different from our own, and hit on right answers that we would never find ourselves. But, more importantly, to learn from the learning of others means also learning from their mistakes. Here, too, we are limited. In any process of trial and error, there are only so many trials that I alone can conceive, only so many errors I alone can commit. I can thus expand my paths of learning by witnessing and attending to the mistakes of others.

Now, directing students to pay attention to each other's mistakes is not easy, especially given the atmosphere of insecurity that I find too often in my classes. The challenge is thus to present mistakes as the norm. The discipline of philosophy does have one advantage in this regard, since the texts we study are always flawed in some way. The history of philosophy is a history of error. Focusing on the errors in the texts studied — with an eye on their importance for learning itself — may help create the right atmosphere. Even as more here needs to be thought, it remains that this kind of focus can only take place in the shared space of the school. Alone, I cannot learn from another's learning.

Still thinking spatially, the second suggestion I have for promoting shared learning between students is to recognize that the space of the school extends far beyond the classroom. All classes also take place elsewhere, before and after the few hours a week that teachers and students spend together in the room they are assigned. Indeed, the majority of the class ought to occur in these other spaces, as students read the texts, work on assignments, reflect on lectures, and discuss the material in all sorts of settings. Here, too, the challenge is to foster shared learning in these other spaces. Developing such practices seems hard to achieve from the teacher's point of view, since they necessarily take place beyond her sight and experience. Teachers must here give up all control of the learning situation, making it difficult to imagine how this might be done. But this also fits with Jacotot's method, which requires that the teacher trap the student in the forest of the problem but then leave her alone to find her way out.

These are thus two suggestions for how we might achieve shared learning understood spatially — to promote fellow students as models for learning and to encourage that these models also be accessed beyond the classroom walls. In this way, we can find a place for spatial coexistence in Jacotot's method, beyond a simple one-to-one relation. Can temporal coexistence be equally inscribed? I would like to think it can, although I am not fully satisfied with my understanding of how. There are two ways

we can approach this question of the sharing of time. The first is embedded in what I have just discussed. The space of the school is not shared in an instant, for space itself is shared across time — we are together in a classroom for a duration. And this duration extends indefinitely with the expanded sense of the school's space, located outside the room itself. In this way, the spatial coexistence that is possible in the school is at once a temporal coexistence — a class unfolds across the expanse of time in which its space is shared. Changing theoretical frameworks, we could describe this structure in terms of the Derridean notion of spacing — that which names the co-implication of space and time, where space is always already temporal, and time always already spatial.²¹ Now, Rancière would almost certainly reject this move, as he takes pains to distinguish his own thinking from what he understands Derrida's to be.²² But I think, here, he would be wrong to do so, and that spacing accurately captures the phenomenon in question.

As a consequence of spacing, everything I have said about cultivating shared learning in space automatically takes place across time too. Spatial sharing is a temporal sharing. But, as an answer, this fails to capture everything in play when one raises questions of time. In particular, there remains a question of how a student can engage the tradition preceding her in a manner that involves a genuine sharing. In one sense, my earlier description of a student's inheritance of the past in universal teaching does involve a sharing with others. This repeats a very old idea, that to read authors from the past is to enter into a conversation with them and to share in their thought. And this idea is also contained in the description of the history of philosophy as the history of error — to study these errors is to share across time. However, this falls short of the relation I desire for two reasons. One is that the sharing goes in only one direction — while the student shares in the thoughts of past authors, the authors do not share in the student's thoughts in return. This practice thus does not quite seem to be “sharing” and would all too easily reinforce the hierarchy of intelligence. A second reason for this view's insufficiency is that one can engage the past in this way all alone. It thus fails to involve what is unique to the school.

Instead, the temporally shared learning I seek must involve other students in the class. It might be as simple as requiring students to encounter the temporal adventures of their classmates, to invite one another into sharing the time that each has discovered. Students could present to each other the tradition they each construct, and, in this way, begin to collectively construct another tradition together. The challenge here would be, however, to do this at the same time as preserving the equality of intelligence.

So, to conclude, I will simply leave you with a number of questions. How might a classroom make possible a sharing of time, one that would maintain the equality of intelligence? Is there a difference between encountering the past on one's own and doing so with others, with others as equals? Does the school enable a temporal coexistence beyond that which arises from the structure of spacing? I invite you to think further on these problems and share any thoughts you might have with those you find around you.²³

1. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, *In Defence of the School: A Public Issue*, trans. Jack McMartin (Leuven: E-ducation, Culture and Society Publishers, 2013).
2. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
3. I should note that Masschelein and Simons attempt to reconcile the claims of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* with the idea of the school in their essay, “The Hatred of Public Schooling: The School as the *Mark of Democracy*,” in Rancière, *Public Education and the Taming of Democracy*, eds. Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 150–165. While different, I believe my analysis to be, for the most part, compatible with theirs.
4. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 16.
5. It may be that the fact that this original event took place institutionally, with a group of students first approaching Jacotot, was decisive for its success. If true, this would advance my goal of making shared learning compatible with Jacotot’s method. My point here is that, in Rancière’s narrative, no attention is paid to the collective dimension of this event.
6. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 76. Similarly, he later writes “There cannot be a class of the emancipated, an assembly or society of the emancipated,” 98 (emphasis in original).
7. *Ibid.*, 58.
8. *Ibid.*, 71 (emphasis in original).
9. Nor, I would argue, is the individualism that Jacotot promotes equivalent to the individualistic consumerism that opponents of democracy charge is rampant among students today, as this charge is diagnosed and criticized by Rancière in *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Verso, 2006), especially chapter 1.
10. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 34.
11. *Ibid.*, 35, translation modified.
12. As Rancière states reflecting back on this work, “Jacotot drew a radical dissociation: Emancipation could never be a social logic. I tried to show in *Disagreement* that this could be articulated otherwise, that the egalitarian condition of equality could lend itself to sequences of acts, to forms of verification that were properly political.” Jacques Rancière, “On Ignorant Schoolmasters,” in Charles Bingham, Gert J. J. Biesta, and Jacques Rancière, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 9.
13. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (New York: Verso, 2009), 16–17.
14. *Ibid.*, 49.
15. Jacques Rancière, *La Méthode de L'égalité* (Paris: Bayard, 2012), 108.
16. As Rancière stresses in *Disagreement*: “This division [*partage*] should be understood here in the double sense of the term: as community and as separation” (26).
17. Rancière, *La Méthode de L'égalité*, 110.
18. Jacques Rancière, “Ecole, Production, égalité,” (1988), <http://www.horlieu-editions.com/textes-en-ligne/politique/ranciere-ecole-production-egalite.pdf>, accessed October 28, 2014.
19. This is also articulated in “The Hatred of Public Schooling.” But even as they focus on the way the time and space of the school makes a common world available to students, Masschelein and Simons don’t discuss the kind of student-student interaction I advocate below.
20. “Learning also takes place at the stultifiers’ school; a professor is a *thing*, less easily handled than a book, undoubtedly, but he can be *learned*: he can be observed, imitated, dissected, put back together.” Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 102.
21. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 68.
22. See, for example, Rancière’s remarks criticizing the messianic notion of time in *La Méthode de L'égalité*, 110–112.