

Criticality Without Guarantees: Reading Critical Pedagogy Strongly Through Freire and Rancière

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One sort of writer lets us realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in re-creating themselves. We thereby become aware of our own half-articulate need to become a new person, one whom we as yet lack words to describe. The other sort reminds us of the failure of our institutions and practices to live up to the convictions to which we are already committed by the public, shared vocabulary we use in daily life. The one tells us that we need not speak only the language of the tribe, that we may find our own words, that we may have a responsibility to ourselves to find them. The other tells us that that responsibility is not the only one we have. Both are right, but there is no way to make both speak a single language.¹

Whereas for Freire ... *it doesn't matter what one learns*, as long as the cause of societal reform is being served, I have argued that — according to a thing-centered interpretation of Rancière — *it doesn't matter who it is that learns*, as long as an attentive study of the subject matter at hand constitutes in itself a self-transformation beyond any individual interest.²

We are thus left to choose between what Richard Rorty calls “reading” and “reading strongly.” To read, Rorty explains, has the implicit notion of what Paulo Freire calls “verbalism” where the “illiterate learner” is to “experience language as *just words and nothing beyond that*.”³ Whereas to “read strongly” embodies not only the Freirean notions of “codification” and “decodification” — the Rancièrian notion of “emancipation” — but also the radical proposition of “changing the way we talk, and thereby changing what we want to do and what we think we are.”⁴

Joris Vlieghe’s essay is a strong reading of critical pedagogy, which situates itself at that intersection where Freire meets Jacques Rancière. This intersection, Vlieghe tells us, is getting crowded, and the recent work by Sarah Galloway becomes a demonstrating example (and to a lesser extent the work of Tyson Lewis). In the essay, Vlieghe proposes a significant departure from the approach that is usually associated with “critical pedagogy.” He calls this “alternative critical pedagogy”: *thing-oriented pedagogy*. This proposal takes its cues from Rancière and not from Freire, who is critiqued for reducing “the content of education to something merely instrumental.” Freire’s pedagogy, Vlieghe explains, is not didactic but political, not about simple transference of skills but consciousness-raising, not about words that are artificially experienced as a simple medium of communication but words that allow students to “really affirm” and “speak” themselves and “take history in hand and make it themselves.” Ultimately, the learner here becomes conscious that “to speak” is not the same as “to utter a word”; that acquiring the possibility to read and to write is a transformative event that changes the students’ lives; and that, in becoming literate, they become conscious of their own oppression and thus becoming awakened “to their capacity for contestation and transformation of the world (through language).”

What is the problem with this proposition? “It” — the subject of study — becomes a mechanism, an instrument to be used in liberation and freedom. In lieu

of this, Vlieghe is asking us to re-envision emancipatory education by returning to investment and desire (even though he does not use those terms, they express his arguments more accurately) into “it” (the subject matter). Freire argues, we are all equipped with the “equality of intelligence.” Rancière agrees; but adds that where we differ is in our will-power to use our intelligence. This is where the teacher (“the master,” to use Rancière’s term) becomes significant in disciplining our will or demonstrating ways that might pique our interest. Vlieghe thus concludes, instead of seeing “it” as an instrument of education for emancipation (the conventional argument in critical pedagogy), “it” becomes a form of education that is in and of itself emancipatory.

Given my bodily location as a Black man who possesses a migrant body, one has to seriously question Vlieghe’s essay, which read more as a colonial nostalgia to the primacy of “the book,” the primacy of the subject matter, and to a less extent the primacy of “the master.” There are two major concerns with Vlieghe’s argument. The first is historical and the second is contextual. From a historical point of view, how can “educational emancipation” be different from “social emancipation”? The educational is deeply social, indeed I failed to see the difference. I think Vlieghe equates “education” with “schooling.” Even though it might happen in schools, we know most of our education takes place outside school. This is particularly true in (urban) indigenous communities.⁵ So, from this perspective, to argue that “mastering the skill of writing and reading constitutes itself an authentic moment of emancipation” is a point well taken. However, I do not know how, based on this argument, Vlieghe reached the conclusion that, “Freire’s approach is political rather than didactical: he is not interested in optimizing learning outcomes.” This is too strong a statement to grapple with and it needs revisiting.

Contextually, what comes to be known as Rancière method misses the fact that we are talking about two highly valued and extremely valorized subject matters: French and Dutch languages. Would we have this same debate if the discussion were about the French and Ki-Swahili languages? Freire was confronted by this latter question (not Rancière). Some of the places where Freire taught were indigenous communities. My point is, in Rancière’s context, students’ investment and desire for the French language was high enough that they did not need a “master.” “It” is already desired; as such, contextually, there is an unjust comparison between the alphabetization project in Freire and Rancière. Having said this, I agree that, “the subject matter does matter.” But from a post-colonial perspective, the conclusion that, “*It does not matter who* is studying a particular book, or a particular language or discipline, what is essential is that students are willing to subject themselves to some-thing,”⁶ is problematic to say the least. We know that, different bodies bring different forms of knowledge (in)to the classroom and that, who we are impacts what we learn and how we learn it.⁷

Moreover, the suggestions that, “students transform themselves according to the demands a particular subject matter places on them” and that “[o]nly then might they experience a *strong affirmation of potentiality*, which has the power to suspend all social order”⁸ are acceptable only as a way to speak about why we invest and

desire certain things and not others. This is especially true in a context where “choice” is a central event in working through our desires. However, what if this question of desire and choice is non-existent, which is the case in most post-colonial contexts? Where Vlieghe’s essay is extremely insightful is in reminding us that hard work in the minute and the trivial of literacies (the po, pu, pe, pi, etc. that Freire detests) is not only necessary but the ground upon which all is built. Contrary to Vlieghe and Rancière, however, not to pay close attention to who the learner is — her desire, investment, and interest — and to give full attention primarily to the “thing” (the subject matter) is to doom the learner to failure.

Here, the notion that the learner will learn through repetition is a method well tested. And as a post-colonial subject who went through it, I can testify to its failure. In “learning written language,” Vlieghe concludes, “it is essential that we repeat over and over again the different constituents of this language, because then we are concerned with language for its own sake, rather than — as Freire prescribes — immediately subjugating language to students’ interests.” If this is the case, then the movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* and rote memorization must be the way to a splendid teaching. Let us leave ourselves aside and invest in something, Vlieghe’s argument goes, that is how we become emancipated. I put this proposal to a group of gradeten social studies students, and their response unanimously was: NO WAY!

1. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xiv–xv.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 20. In discussing Freire’s “critical alphabetization program,” Joris Vlieghe explains that, for Freire, “codification” is a pedagogical method where students are invited to pick out a set of themes that are relevant to them, which “results in a selection of (seventeen) keywords, accompanied by a photograph/pictorial representation of day-to-day life-conditions. This,” Vlieghe continues, “might be, for instance, *comida* (food), *dinheiro* (money), or *união* (trade union). Each of these codifications offers the opportunity of a further ‘decodification’: a discussion regarding other issues related to the codified themes.”

5. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 1994).

6. Emphasis in original.

7. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.

8. Emphasis in original.