**No time or place for universal teaching: *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and contemporary work on pedagogy**

When the editors of this book asked if I could write something on how Rancière had contributed to pedagogy as a discipline and what educationalists might have to say in response to his work, I thought this might make for a short chapter. Rancière has nothing to say to on how schools might improve their methods of teaching and learning. His work is not an addition or an alternative to disciplines laying claim to pedagogy as their object, such as the sociology of education and educational psychology. In terms of how his work has been received in education, it has generated less discussion than in philosophy or history, judging by the number of references in these subjects’ respective journals. Anecdotal impression suggests that *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is more widely read among artists than among teachers.

Part of this picture is changing, as a result of secondary literature which has brought Rancière’s work to the attention of people working in education. For example, Bingham and Biesta’s recent book (2010) draws on Rancière’s ideas to explore contemporary debates in education, and also to read texts from other disciplines as instances of pedagogy, a move which shows pedagogy to be a problem about how to write, read and speak; what it is to teach and learn in any place or time, rather than a specific concern for educationalists and schools only.

However, the relative patchiness of reference to Rancière’s work in education is not solely due, I think, to lack of awareness. There is also something unreadable about his argument, in the sense that it does not appear relevant to the field of education. I say this on the basis of responses I have had to a couple of articles about Rancière’s work (Pelletier 2009, 2009a), from colleagues in my own and other education departments. Although these have generally had a positive response, a recurring comment is that Rancière’s ideas are also untimely. This is usually attributed to one or both of two posited phenomena. First, pedagogic thinking and practice have evolved since the time of Jacotot: teachers are no longer masters, with much greater emphasis placed in schools now on student projects, collaborative groupwork, and the personalisation of the curriculum. The valorisation of constructivism is said to have, for better or worse, removed knowledge from its central position in the classroom and allowed the teacher to become a facilitator of students’ self-directed efforts to generate their own understandings. Second, Jacotot’s ‘method’ - universal teaching, by which a teacher ignorant of the subject matter demands of the student the manifestation of intelligence - is already widely practised, in the sense that teachers commonly teach subjects they know nothing about, particularly in higher education, but also in schools. This follows partly from the curricularisation of aspects of life which, previously, have not been subject to certification, such as childcare, happiness and well-being, or social science research methodology. It also follows from the marketisation of education, with courses emerging and disappearing in response to identified markets rather than as developments within a discipline[[1]](#endnote-1).

These responses have perplexed me, in part because the significance of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* did not appear to me to rely on the validity of Jacotot’s method, in the sense of whether it ‘works’ or not as a way of teaching and learning. The ‘untimeliness’ of universal teaching as an idea also seems to echo responses to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* upon its first publication, as described by Ross (1991) in her introduction to the English edition. She notes that it was not immediately apparent to readers in 1987, when the book was published, how Jacotot’s 19th century adventures could contribute to debates within the then French socialist government about how to reform the school system.

One way of responding to these criticisms would be to point out that universal teaching is not a pedagogic method, to be applied in schools or universities to generate emancipation. Unsurprisingly, this is indeed what this chapter will say. But this is what Rancière and Jacotot have said before, without apparently always being heard as saying such – perhaps because *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* raises troubling questions about what one does every day, when one works as a teacher in the state system of education; what one’s method is, and how it might be different. So, partly in response to the editors’ request to treat pedagogy as some kind of discipline, but also to examine further the perpetual untimeliness of universal teaching, I will read *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, or more specifically the idea of universal teaching, in the light of contemporary theories of learning and teaching, to examine how Rancière’s argument can appear at once very familiar and yet out of place, or out of time. This is what I do in the first part of this chapter. Subsequently, I examine how the problem of inequality appears ‘timely’ in education. The conclusion returns to the question of how one might find a place for Rancière’s work in contemporary educational practices.

**What is it to learn and to teach?**

Is it possible to read *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* as a tract advocating a way of teaching and learning? If one were to try and answer this question positively, one could point out that many of the claims made in that text resonate with contemporary learning theory, especially those that have emerged through engagement and argument with the work of Vygotsky, the marxist psychologist who wrote in the 1920s and 1930s and whose ideas remain central to many teacher education courses. Whereas Vygotsky’s work differentiated between spontaneous concepts (acquired in everyday activity) and scientific concepts (acquired through systematic instruction) and figured the move from the one to the other as a process of ‘internalisation’, more recent social-cultural theory has endeavoured to move away from metaphors of assimilation and transmission and foregrounded instead terms such as ‘participation’. This concept of ‘participation’, for instance in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991, 1996), challenges many conventional views of learning. It works to collapse the boundary between interiority and exteriority, or, in other words, mind and activity. Intelligence, as the property of a mind or the potential of a ‘habitus’, thereby ceases to be a relevant, and sensible, distinction; the object of analysis is activity patterns rather than individual capacities or socially structured dispositions. Learning, or knowing, consequently ceases to be a condition, and instead is identified in terms of evolving and continuously renewed relations among people and artefacts in activity. ‘Understanding’ becomes a material practice; an act rather than a state, and therefore a negotiated, mediated process of transformation rather than acquisition. By extension, learning is important not so much because it sustains the transfer of knowledge but because it is concerned with the transformation of individuals.

This conception of learning, widely referenced in contemporary education literature, resonates with the principles of ‘universal teaching’, described in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. It figures knowledge as a position within an evolving set of relations, a move which focuses analysis on the principles by which knowledge is recognized within a collectivity, rather than on whether knowledge is possessed. The emphasis on activity transforms knowledge into a practice: it is something that is done. This collapses the distinction between doing, meaning-making and knowing: or, in terms deployed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, between translation and understanding; manual and intellectual work, in the sense that both are treated as material activities. By extension, if knowledge is done, it cannot also be said to be done ‘to’ anyone: if the unit of analysis is patterns of participation, experts cannot be attributed as causal determinants of anyone else’s knowledge. With learning/knowing defined as the transformation of persons, the most relevant distinction for differentiating between pedagogic practices pertains to the distribution of positions rather than to the content area or subject of knowledge. In other words, distinctions cannot be sustained between egalitarian and illusory knowledge, science and misrecognition, or even science and opinion (in so far as both are treated as material practices characterized by particular ways of legitimizing themselves).

Having described these continuities between universal teaching and contemporary socio-cultural theories of learning, there are several aspects of universal teaching which, from the perspective of socio-cultural theory, appear problematic. One of these concerns the constitution of ‘will’. Universal teaching proclaims: “an individual can do anything he wants” (Rancière 1991: 65), since man is a will served by an intelligence. What differentiates poorer work from better work then is not intelligence but attention, the strength with which will has been exercised ( :50). So, although intelligences are equal, wills are differentiated in terms of their power. This raises a question about what might account for these stated differences in will power, or attention. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacotot’s response to this question is to reiterate that “all intelligences are equal”, whilst denying that this reduces thought or intellect to the slogan “whoever wants is able to” (: 56). So, intellect serves the will, but the question of how will comes to constitute itself, and differentially, is left rather open. Vygotsky’s work, and much socio-cultural theory, emphasizes the mutual determination of will and intellect, a move intended to avoid the “spiritualistic principle of absolute freewill”, as well as the notion that thought is mechanically determined by external circumstances, bypassing the necessity for a will altogether (Vygotsky, quoted in Derry 2004). So, for instance, whereas in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, people come to Jacotot because they want to learn the piano or to paint, with will here apparently preceding the manifestation of intellect, a Vygotskian argument might say that it is in learning to paint or play the piano that one also develops the will to do so and the intellect to know how: intelligence does not so much serve the will, but rather the two emerge together, or are mediated by each other (Derry 2004). Hence the importance of instruction in Vygotsky, in contrast to the more voluntaristic approach to learning subject matter in universal teaching. Instruction in ‘scientific concepts’ is emancipatory, in Vygotsky’s argument, precisely because this is what enables the will to exercise greater self-determination[[2]](#endnote-2). *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* shows how this point of self-determination is infinitely deferred by explanation / instruction; but it does not really address the reason for Vygotsky’s argument, which was to reconcile a concept of will with that of emancipation, whilst avoiding equating emancipation with freedom from constraint (i.e. “whoever wants is able to”).

One could however argue that the will, in universal teaching, is not so much a free-wheeling spontaneous force, but *is* exercised in relation to material things; the ignorant schoolmaster teaches by establishing an equal distance to the material object of knowledge and demanding that the will be exercised in relation to its interpretation. For example, Jacotot teaches students how to read French by telling them to read a book in French, rather than explaining the French language to them. The material object of knowledge – in that instance, a bilingual edition of a book – is a means of verifying the equality of two minds: in learning to read, the book, as material artifact, works as “the only bridge of communication between two minds”; it is “what keeps two minds at an equal distance” (:32). Similarly, in learning to paint, a painting by Poussin can be a starting point for verifying the “‘unity of feeling’, that is to say, the meaning of the painting” that the student can speak about and respond to (:66). Equality is *verified* here in the distance to an object of knowledge, in the capacity of anyone to interpret it.

The problem with this argument is that for such verification to work, and such distance to be maintained, the value or status of the object has to be assumed: it has to be taken as an instance of ‘French language’ or ‘painting’. So learning to paint, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, involves interpreting Poussin’s ‘masterpieces’. Jacotot’s students make the claim “me too, I’m a painter” (: 66-67) only by treating the common object as an instance of (a great) painting; by treating this meaning of the object as given. So, whilst the ignorant schoolmaster divests himself of knowledge but retains authority, the material object of knowledge conjoins both. As Nina Power (2009) argues: “The danger of shifting the master from person to object doesn’t necessarily overturn the hierarchy of student and teacher, just shifts it from the classroom to the library”.

This danger is illustrated in the separation of learning and ‘assessment’, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. When Jacotot is accused of having developed a method which simply involves the blind leading the blind, and which consequently separates the science of scholars (those who produce ‘masterpieces’ or write books, presumably) from a science of the people, the response is as follows: “one must be learned to judge the results of the work, to verify the student’s science. The ignorant [schoolmaster] himself will do *less* and *more* at the same time. He will not verify what the student has found: he will verify that the student has searched. He will judge whether or not he has paid attention” (: 31). This distinction between what ignorant schoolmasters do and what scholars do implies that what scholars do is somehow different from – ‘less and more’ – verifying that others have searched with attention. But what is this difference; on what basis can it be maintained? And if one does maintain it, how does this constitute a counter to the accusation that, in universal teaching, there is a science for scholars and a science for people? If learned scholars *must* ‘judge’ the work of students, how does this avoid re-inscribing the mastery of the explaining teacher / scholar? For instance, when the results of universal teaching are examined in the instance of learning to paint, the stated disappointing results are justified as follows: “Undoubtedly, there’s a great distance from this [what students endeavored to do] to making masterpieces….But it’s not a matter of making great painters; it’s a matter of making the emancipated: people capable of saying, ‘me too, I’m a painter” (: 66-67). But what is the nature of this distance separating masterpieces from students’ work? Why is making the emancipated *not* a matter of making great painters (what then is a matter of making great painters)? And if the former is distinguished from the latter in kind (in ‘matter’), then on what basis can students claim ‘me too, I’m a painter’?

The materialism of post-Vygotskian, socio-cultural theory avoids inscribing the object of knowledge with authority, by focusing on the practices within which objects emerge as meaningful rather than on the meaning/status of the objects themselves. Learning to paint, in this sense, is not about an individual’s response to a painting but more concerned with participating in the activity of seeing, discussing, imitating, judging and creating particular kinds of objects. What distinguishes one object from another is not ascribed to inherent virtues (painterliness, literariness) but to the practices for classifying such objects and identifying their unity. Hence the concept ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1996) which denotes a unity constituted by particular ways of doing, seeing, judging, and so on. ‘Unity of feeling’ is derived from sharing a practice rather than an object.

Although there are similarities between universal teaching and contemporary learning theory, then, the differences are also stark. In universal teaching, the determinant of learning is displaced from intelligence to will, a move which splits the two from each other. Learning is the demonstration of strength of will exercised in relation to an authoritative object of knowledge, whose speech or meaning can be heard and responded to by any intelligence. In socio-cultural theory, the determinant of learning is displaced from intelligence to participation in practices, a move which conjoins will and intelligence – in the sense that will is exercised in relation to joining a community, with intellect developing through such participation. Learning is participating in practices of knowing in increasingly authoritative ways, with no distinction made between learning and its legitimization. This implies a vision of community as something with a periphery and a core – learning means moving from the former to the latter.

So, does the emergence and recent development of a materialist argument about what learning is make universal teaching redundant / untimely or insufficiently elaborated to inform contemporary work on pedagogy? One way of answering this would be to say that Rancière’s writing provides other definitions of ‘will’, art and literature from those that appear in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. In *The Nights of Labour* (1981/1989), will is not so much an individualistic and indeterminate exercise, but precisely the demand to participate as a member of one collectivity (those who work) in the practices of another (those who have leisure). This does not account for any presumed differences in will power, but it does imply that will emerges in relation to concrete circumstances. Also, Rancière’s book on images (2003), among others, unpicks the category of art, and examines it in terms of modes of perception rather than an object’s attributes. Again, this does not resolve the question about how to judge the quality of (artistic) work, but it does imply that such qualities are not authoritatively imposed by the work itself. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, therefore, is not Rancière’s book on education: one could read all his books, and the differences between them, through the lens of this idea, since they all address the issue of how subjects (learn to) think and feel the world in particular ways.

However, identifying differences between contemporary theories of learning and universal teaching does not really address how the latter can appear ‘untimely’ in education. To return to this concern, I will develop a little further the comparison between universal teaching and contemporary work on learning and teaching in education.

**Pedagogy and community**

Lave and Wenger’s concept of communities of practice avoids equating learning / pedagogy with schooling. The argument that learning takes place through participation contrasts with the historical emphasis, in education, on instruction and methods of teaching. Their representation of community as something with a core and a periphery, and their focus on trajectories which move from ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ to ‘full participation’, is a reminder of their background in anthropology: they are concerned primarily with the maintenance and generational re-development of cultural orders – in contrast to Jacotot’s/Rancière’s emphasis on the suspension or re-distribution of social order. However, recent developments of their work have developed the idea of ‘non-legitimate’ forms of participation and emphasized the multiplicitous and overlapping nature of communities. They have also clarified that their theory makes no presumptions about newcomers’ status as novices (in the sense of ignorant/lacking capability), nor of their inevitable progression towards mastery (Whiteman 2007).

In the area that I work, around new media and education, the ‘communities of practice’ concept has been eagerly taken up to study pedagogy in settings which do not feature official instructors, for instance ‘online communities’. In particular, there has been much interest in education in the practices of media fans – the individuals that celebrate and document their relationships to diverse forms of entertainment (including videogames, television, film, music and media celebrities) – which are seen to demonstrate pedagogic processes, with fans learning from each other through processes of affiliation to a common object of interest (e.g Lewis *et al* 2009, Jenkins 2004, Gee 2003). This interest in sites of activity lacking institutionalized intellectual hierarchies contrasts with the arguments Rancière analyses in *Hatred of Democracy* (2005), which betray a fear that education has become *too* democratic, with students thinking themselves equal to their betters, and lacking respect for the authority of the teacher and his/her knowledge. In research on the pedagogy of new media, there has been a different movement, with enthusiasm expressed for the pedagogic productivity of students’ ‘popular culture’.

In some respects, these accounts of communities of practice echo arguments from *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. I will briefly give one example, taken from the work of Gee (2003, 2004). Gee has done extensive work on how players learn to play videogames, including through participation in fan communities. His interest in these activities stems from the opposition he perceives between pedagogy in ‘popular culture’ and in schools, as denoted in the title of his book *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling* (2004). Contemporary sites of game play – especially online - are seen to offer a model of enculturation into skilled practices, which stands in contrast to the apparent failure of schools to achieve a similar level of productive participation. Gee recruits Lave and Wenger’s work to offer two contrasting narratives: in the first, video game players and fans learn how to play, act, interact, value and feel through increasing participation in the gaming community, progressively learning the meaning of words and symbols in context; in the second narrative, set against a background of ‘traditional schooling’, students are stupefied by drill and testing, simply memorise facts, and learn abstract systems of thought detached from experience. Consequently, schools should learn from communities where there are no ‘teachers’, just ‘leaders’ who “don’t and can’t order people around or create rigid, unchanging, and impregnable hierarchies” (Gee 2004: 87).

In gaming communities, then, there is, according to Gee, no instruction, because there is no unjustified authority, indeed only “porous leadership” (: 87). Participating in such a community of practice means becoming increasingly expert in a game’s design, rules and values – and anyone, with sufficient will power, can gain this expertise. The game, as the common object of thought, generates ‘unity of feeling’, in the sense of common ways of being and thinking.

However, it is perhaps already clear that I have selected this example because it also enables differences to be drawn out between the precepts of universal teaching and current work in education on pedagogy. To do this, I would first like to identify the curious transformation of the ‘communities of practice’ concept as it moves from ethnographic/anthropological research to work on education and schooling[[3]](#endnote-3). Two things seem to happen in this move.

First, ‘community of practice’ ceases to be a concept to guide analysis, and becomes the attribute of a setting. In other words, a ‘community of practice’ is no longer what is constructed through research, but its starting point, the characteristic of a site of research – a move which transforms research narratives into *explanations* of social order. So Gee’s account *explains* why players occupy a specific position in the community: they do so because they have reached different points in the development of their knowledge. This implies a pre-determined end point and direction to their learning. The *reason* why the community is ordered as it is, including with its porous leadership, is because of the level of knowledge players have gained about the object of ‘affinity’ (e.g. the game *Age of Mythology*). What makes leadership porous then is that ‘leaders’ are simply those that have the most knowledge: since this knowledge can always be improved, equality and the collapse of unrighteous hierarchy is achieved in the measured progress towards this common goal. So, whereas Lave and Wenger’s work identified social order in terms of a perpetually moving loci of ‘full participation’, Gee’s work identifies it in terms of levels of knowledge of the common object.

The second transformation in the concept ‘community of practice’ in work on schooling and institutionalized education is that features such as legitimacy, participation, and authenticity become essentially the attributes of communities, rather than of the positions comprising them. So, concern is expressed about how a community of practice can be built, or strengthened, made *more* participative, inclusive or authentic. In Gee’s work, this concern is expressed in the principles of learning characterizing fan websites and video game play which ‘traditional schooling’ could incorporate, to make learning more ‘active’ and ‘critical’. This recommendation is based on the idea that learning in schools is ‘passive’, and that students lack ‘criticality’ because they simply memorise knowledge for tests – a situation to be remedied through more participative, authentic (as in, grounded in experience) methods of teaching and learning. The principles of learning in gaming communities are therefore viewed as treatment to the passive situation of the school student. The problem with ‘traditional schooling’ then is that it fails to fulfill its purpose of making people participate ‘actively’ in community life, because it makes them into passive consumers of knowledge (unlike good video games, which sustain ‘active’, ‘critical’ communities).

These transformations in the ‘communities of practice’ concept are consequential, in that they make the basis of community a shared ethos (a common way of being and knowing, a shared love of the common object) rather than shared practices. The transformations also have a temporal dimension: learning involves moving towards an end-point, a future state of full participation / full knowledge of the object. Indeed, in Gee’s work, the argument for learning from videogame communities is that they demonstrate the latest learning theory, with schools needing to ‘catch-up’ with recent research on learning, as well as contemporary popular culture.

It is the positing of a shared ethos as the goal of learning, to be realized at some point in the future, which is refused in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. And it is this refusal which, I think, makes it appear perpetually out of date. This ‘out of dateness’ appears when universal teaching is read as a method which hasn’t ‘caught up’ yet with a future in which full participation / full knowledge is realized, and manifests itself as shared community ethos. In other words, universal teaching appears out of time when it is framed as a means to an end.

Chapter 5 of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, as well as Ross’ introduction to the English edition, suggest that universal teaching is repeatedly read as a means, despite Jacotot’s and Rancière’s statements to the contrary. This reading negates another: that universal teaching is a demolition of the *justifications* for pedagogy as means, justifications which pertain to the relationship between schooling and community. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, the justifications are described as follows. First, what holds a community together is shared knowledge: becoming a member of a community involves adopting its ways of knowing, valuing, perceiving and so on. A community, from this perspective, is a common regime of sensibility, into which new members are initiated over time, using pedagogic techniques. This claim can be seen in Gee’s argument, when he states that what makes game players a community is a shared, consensual knowledge of games; and that what makes them an exemplary community is their pedagogic effectiveness in initiating new players into the community’s rules and values. Second, if knowledge is the basis of community, then those who lead that community, who govern it, are those who know best; who have the most knowledge, and who govern simply to help others catch up. So in Gee’s argument, leadership and authority are simply the due owed to those who know games best, and are only enacted to help less experienced players achieve ‘full participation’. What makes gaming communities appear more active and critical than schools – more successful pedagogically – is that their authority structures are no longer enacted in the imposition of abstract knowledge and meaningless tests, but rather emerge ‘naturally’ from the varying levels of experience of the community’s members. The distribution of social rank, the distinction between leaders and followers, here, is not the result of unreasoned, uncritical authority, but simply the differentiated distribution of expertise gained over time.

The principles of universal teaching emerge from adifferent, opposing conception of community. The demand, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, that intellect manifest itself in the confrontation between the will of the student and that of the ignorant schoolmaster posits community as a polemical encounter: in other words, what binds the schoolmaster to the student is not a common set of values, interests or sensibilities, to be achieved by the student in some future, but confrontation between what is common, and over what is common. If one were to define a gaming community in this light, one might look to interactions in terms of ongoing confrontations over what a game is and is not, what it is to play and not play, what it is to be a fan and who can claim to be one, and so on – not with a view to checking their validity or the display of pre-existing social power, but in terms of confrontations or disagreements about what constitutes the community. If such confrontations are explained in terms of different levels of experience, what becomes perceptible is not disagreement but inequality: the incapacity of most community members to know as much as its porous leadership, and the good news that they are slowly catching up as a result of appropriate scaffolding. This perspective turns confrontation over what knowledge consists of and the basis on which one can claim to have it into temporal trajectories stretching from incapacity to capacity, a move which makes innocent the organization of community into a core and periphery, and which transforms disagreement over the object of knowledge into a call for those with more experience to enlighten those with yet-to-be-developed intellect.

**Inequality as a present concern in education**

When *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is read as an attack on the presuppositions of pedagogy, it raises questions about the assumptions underpinning endeavours to treat learning as an instrument of more reasonable hierarchy, or ‘porous leadership’; greater self-determination (as in, more active, critical community members, an argument which treats self-determination as a matter of degree); and, with these, better community bonds (a common ethos).

Such endeavours are apparent in arguments that make use of concepts of ‘participation’ and ‘communities of practice’ to criticize the hierarchies and authority structure of schooling and institutionalized education. They are of course apparent more widely than this. To pick one contemporary UK example: in recent debates about higher education funding, a common objection to the rise in tuition fees is that it will deter people from poorer backgrounds from applying to university, and so impede social mobility. One argument against the rise in fees, put forward by the President of the National Union of Students Aaron Porter, is that university education should be about ‘ability, not ability to pay’[[4]](#endnote-4). To address these concerns about social mobility, various measures have been floated by the current government, including encouraging universities to admit students on the basis of ‘potential’ rather than academic attainment exclusively; offering reassurance and clarification to working class people to remedy their culturally-ingrained fear of debt; and improving state-funded education so that students in the state sector have the same chances as those in private schools. These arguments stem from different perceptions about what inequality is, emphasizing either the inability of the poor to pay for education or their inability to benefit from it (in the sense of having lower educational outcomes). However, both lines of argument treat higher education, and the knowledge it confers, as a way of rectifying the illegitimacy of the community’s social order, and of ensuring that individuals are able to find a place suited to their capabilities in the community’s division of labour.

Rectifying the community’s order through education is also an important ambition of many sociological studies of the curriculum[[5]](#endnote-5). The role of schools in re-making the inequalities of the social order is a prominent theme in this literature, although there is extensive debate about how/whether the school operates as an independent force, and how sociological analysis might open up prospects for altering existing patterns of authority and control (see for example Frandji and Vitale 2010 for a recent examination of the debate between Bernstein and Bourdieu on this point). Bernstein’s attention to the relationship between disciplinary boundaries and social boundaries / order is an endeavour to identify the autonomy of the school, and thereby to move the sociology of education away from its historical emphasis on reproduction (Rochex 2010). There is some affinity here with Rancière’s argument about the poetics of disciplines and their war on “allodoxy” (the antonym of orthodoxy) (Rancière 2006: 7). Both writers view disciplines (and, in Bernstein’s case, the curriculum) as a principle for policing / maintaining social hierarchies and “controlling sentiments” (Bernstein 1975: 62), or, in Rancière’s terminology, sensibilities: “For the many, socialization into knowledge is socialization into order, the existing order…discipline then means accepting a given selection, organization, pacing and timing of knowledge realized in the pedagogical frame” (Bernstein 1975: 97-8). What disciplines / curricula work to achieve is the imposition of coherence and epistemological hierarchy where there is none: “the ultimate mystery of the subject [in the sense of a discipline taught in school] is not …order, but disorder, not the known but the unknown” (: 97), a mystery, Bernstein argues, that is revealed only late in the educational life, and then only to the few who demonstrate successful ‘socialisation’. It is this conception of discipline which underpins Bernstein’s and Rancière’s shared skepticism of the claims of ‘progressive’, anti-authoritarian pedagogies to reduce ‘social control’ (Bernstein’s terminology), since these do nothing to challenge an orthodox (i.e. anti-allodoxy) conception of knowledge – as demonstrated by Gee’s analysis of gaming communities. However, whereas universal teaching treats the concordance of social and disciplinary order as an occasion to ignore both, Bernstein emphasizes the importance of developing disciplinary identity. Failure to achieve this results in “wounded” (Bernstein 1975: 100) individuals. This wound is characterized by low educational achievement, understood as the failure to achieve a sense of time, place and purpose[[6]](#endnote-6) - in other words, a failure to find a place in the existing social order. In this version of the sociology of education, then, a balance needs to be found between giving individuals a sense of time and place within the community’s social order whilst maintaining the openness or malleability of these identifiers. Failure to achieve this – or educational failure – results in suffering, or ‘wounded’ individuals.

*The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, and Rancière’s work more widely, challenges these two ways of being concerned about community, which I summarise as follows: (1) concern about the illegitimacy of the community’s order; and (2) concern on behalf of, or in the name of, those who suffer as a result of the community’s order.

With respect to the first of these concerns – A claim central to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is that there is no relationship between one’s intellect and one’s position in the social order. In this respect, universal teaching is no threat to the social order or to the division of labour, since it denies that intellect/education is, or should be, the basis of social organization. This is because there is no legitimate basis for social order – no rational explanation or legitimate principle for role allocation in the division of labour. Equality means precisely this: that there is no reason or explanation for inequality. The issue then, for Rancière, is not the lack of social mobility, or the way in which people are assigned occupational destinies by their educational attainment. The problem rather is that the division of labour is justified in the name of ways of being and feeling; that a relationship is posited between particular aptitudes (and inaptitudes) and particular occupations. The verification of equality, in universal teaching, works to deny this, to affirm “the capacity of anyone to be *where he can’t be* and to do *what he can’t do*” (Rancière 2009: 223[[7]](#endnote-7)) – an affirmation which frames work/the division of labour as the *condemnation* to be in a particular time and place, and to be nowhere else. Work, then, has nothing to do with aptitude or ability – it is an assignation to a particular time and place in the community’s order, which denies the capacity of anyone to contribute to the community in any way. Rather than endeavoring to find better matches between aptitudes and occupations, the emphasis, in universal teaching, is on the capacity of anyone to do anything.

With respect to the second way of framing concern about how community is ordered – there is much work in education research which concerns itself with addressing the marginalization and educational failure of particular social groups, for instance, ethnic minorities, women, working class children, children with ‘special educational needs’, and so on. This concern can take the form of identifying curricula or pedagogic techniques which promote the academic achievement of, and thus the inclusion of, such identified groups, giving them a legitimate place within the order of the school. By contrast, Jacotot/Rancière present universal teaching as precisely that: universal, rather than in the interests of, or the name of, particular social groups / identities (on this interpretation of universal teaching, see Rancière’s contribution in this volume). The problem is not, from this perspective, that some social groups fail and others succeed, and that the former ‘suffer’ as a result of their failure. Rather, the problem is remedying the contempt which fuels belief in inequality, including by those who fail. It is worth emphasizing here that the principles of universal teaching do not spring from Jacotot’s sense of empathy with ‘the poor’ or their ‘suffering’. He sees claims such as ‘I do not understand’ and ‘I cannot do this’ as statements of contempt concealing themselves behind false modesty: one recognises one’s inferiority in one sphere of life in order for one’s superiority to be recognised in another, a sphere one also judges superior. So it is in recognising the teacher’s intellectual superiority that the student is able to claim intellectual superiority over others (e.g. peers or younger children); it is in recognising the intellectual superiority of the university professor that the school teacher is able claim intellectual superiority over students. Recognising one’s inferiority, or legitimate peripheral position in the community, in relation to superiors, or those who are closer to ‘full participation’ in the community, is what the education system treats as learning – the development of disciplinary identity. The challenge therefore is not to legitimize this claim, but to suspend the whole system of recognition, and the perverse satisfaction that it affords.

**Surviving *The Ignorant Schoolmaster***

When one works in the state system of education, how does one survive reading *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*? Although the book is clearly not an attack on the work of individual teachers, nor a call to them to stop teaching, its demolition of the justifications for pedagogy brings into unforgiving light the paradoxes of working in an institution where one continuously sorts students (and colleagues[[8]](#endnote-8)) hierarchically according to a notion of ability, whilst upholding a commitment to equality and social justice[[9]](#endnote-9). Universal teaching does not provide the reassurances offered by the work of Bourdieu or even Foucault, both of which often feature on professional development courses aimed at teachers, and which can be read to demonstrate either that ‘resistance’ is futile, or that the possession of ‘critical’ knowledge is a way of distancing oneself from the malevolent workings of the education system. In portraying equality as a practice, rather than a state, universal teaching makes much greater demands on those who work in education.

The book does not tell its readers how to respond to such demands, a move which differentiates it from the literature on ‘critical pedagogy’, including the work of Paulo Freire. The demand is not for a particular approach to teaching, but for an exploration, or an experimentation, in response to the supposition of equality. Universal teaching was one such experiment, but there is no suggestion, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, that it can or should be repeated: its description serves to locate a moment of transformation in the practice of ‘doing’ equality, rather than to resurrect the past.

Although universal teaching was an argument against all systems of instruction for the People, it is hard to avoid thinking about learning and education without considering this system, even if only in opposition to it – as the literature on communities of practices makes clear. The way in which this system is considered has changed since *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was first published: the debates which Kristin Ross (1991) describes portray a time when the curriculum was a subject of some public argument. Today, discussions on the curriculum (in the UK at least) – for instance about how to teach reading and writing – often refer themselves to matters of ‘best evidence’ and expertise.

So, if universal teaching is not a pedagogic model to be followed through, and if debates about education have evolved since *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was first published, what to make of each today? What I have endeavoured to explore in this chapter is the way in which pedagogy continues to be imagined as a means to a better ordered community: it was this dynamic which universal teaching refused and which *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* set out to undermine. Education institutions, and those who work in them, have something to gain from this representation of community, not least their funding: in the UK in the last 15 years, there has been a huge increase in expenditure on schools and education research, with the justification that this was a way of tackling social inequality and social injustice; and despite the current economic crisis, funding for schools remains protected according to the same rationale. At the same time, however, the education system is commonly described as ‘failing’ – failing to ensure social mobility, to raise educational outcomes and especially of the poor, to reduce inequality, in other words, failing to deliver a just communal order, in which everyone is in their proper place. Education research which draws on the ‘community of practice’ concept to identify the failures of the education system reiterates many of these complaints.

The arguments constituting universal teaching make a case for a different problematic; a different justification for education. One which starts from the ‘illusion’ of equality and experiments with ways of demonstrating this. This would involve seeing education as an occasion for confrontation, in which what is at stake is the demonstration of equality. The problem of teaching and learning might then be formulated in terms of judging better and worse ways of representing the world, or the community, whilst presuming the equality of those creating such representations. This is uncertain, experimental work; its easy statement is not intended to deny the sporadic way in which such work is thinkable and doable in education institutions[[10]](#endnote-10). But it is a more optimistic enterprise than mourning the symbolic violence of the school, re-tracing the unchanging contours of its discourses, or finding more effective ways of assigning people to their proper place in the social order. It opens up again the possibility of seeing teaching/learning as a hopeful endeavour, concerned not with knowing the world, but with creating it anew.

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1. A very different way of conceptualizing Rancière’s ‘untimeliness’ is the argument that his work touches on issues characteristic of feminist interventions in education over the last twenty years, particularly feminist ethnography in education. This is not a criticism of his work but rather of the attention which a male French/continental philosopher manages to garner, in contrast to the ongoing work of feminist women researchers. In order to avoid reinscribing this dynamic and also to examine how Rancière’s writing might become a resource within feminist debates, I have, in previous work, explored the continuities and discontinuities between Rancière’s writing and feminist writing. This exploration could go much further, particularly I think with regard to ideas of method and discipline. My focus in this chapter is on some more negative responses to Rancière’s ideas in education. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. It is worth noting that the distinction between spontaneous and scientific concepts has been dropped by more recent sociocultural theory, notably Lave and Wenger, and been replaced by the opposition between ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ and ‘full participation’: in other words, a distinction between types of concepts has been replaced by one between types of positions within a collectivity. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gee’s concern is with non-institutionalized sites of education, but my argument here is that he sees gaming websites as educational sites – as sites that can inform approaches to teaching and learning in schools, once schools ‘catch up’ temporally with what students are apparently already doing in their popular culture. The transformations I discuss in the concept ‘community of practice’ are not specific to Gee; they are commonly traceable in education literature which draws on Lave and Wenger’s concept with a view to *creating* communities of practice, notably in professional and vocational education. In identifying these transformations, I do not imply that others have misinterpreted Lave and Wenger’s work but rather interpreted it with a view to creating communities of practice which ‘improve learning’: such interpretations can be justified with respect to Lave and Wenger’s work. My examination of the two moves is an attempt to identify how such interpretations can be justified. It should be clear however that I read Lave and Wenger’s work differently, and place greater emphasis on the process of legitimisation. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Aaron Porter made this statement at the 10th November 2010 demonstration, in a speech to the demonstrators. Subsequent reporting of this demonstration suggested that it marked a split between the NUS leadership and many NUS members. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Because I have examined the debate between Bourdieu and Rancière elsewhere, I will not revisit here. For a discussion of Rancière’s argument with Bourdieu’s sociology of education, see Pelletier (2009), Nordmann (2006) and Ross (1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I deduce the characteristics of this ‘wound’ from Bernstein’s argument that educational success confers order, identity and meaning, and that the organisation of a curriculum should be deemed a failure if it does not give students a sense of time, place and purpose - see Bernstein (1975), Chapter 5, p. 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. My translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I’m thinking here for instance of the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK, by which academics evaluate and rank each other’s research ‘outputs’ from 1 to 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Equality and social justice are two terms commonly found in mission statements of the Institute of Education, which is where I teach. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. It is work which Bingham and Biesta (2010) explore imaginatively, concretely and at length. I refer readers to this book to develop this conclusion further. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)