

Alphabetization as Emancipatory Practice: Freire, Rancière, and Critical Pedagogy

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In this essay I am concerned with the critical possibilities of education in relation to concrete pedagogical practices. More precisely I develop an argument for a “critical pedagogy” that departs in significant ways from the approach that is usually associated with this name.¹ This “alternative” critical pedagogy shares with the usual approach the firm belief that there is no necessity in any given order of things and that education might offer possibilities for a fundamental transformation of both individual and collective existence. However, I also argue that existing versions of critical pedagogy have a serious shortcoming, as they reduce the content of education to something merely instrumental. This is to say that particular skills and subject matters — that is, the concrete “things” students might acquire — *only* have significance insofar as they contribute to social reform. I will defend the position that emancipation should not only be dealt with as an objective external to encounters with the world in educational contexts, but that it might be part of these encounters themselves. In other words: whereas critical pedagogy, as usually conceived, can be seen as education *for* emancipation, I will argue for a form of education that is *in and of itself* emancipatory.

More specifically I pursue an analysis of a “basic” educational practice, namely, teaching and learning how to read and to write (alphabetization). Rather than dealing with the issue of education and emancipation from a merely theoretical standpoint, I focus on one particular example. This practice seems to me a most interesting case, not only because it forms the origin of the western schooling system or because it has remained central to almost all aspects of education,² but also because it has been highly important for the history of critical pedagogy itself. In the first part of this contribution, I investigate a case that was central to the development of critical pedagogy — namely, Paulo Freire’s alphabetization programs, which he devised in the 1960s as an emancipatory project for the poor in Latin America. In the second part, I confront this case with a different idea of emancipation, as developed by Jacques Rancière in relation to a (nineteenth century) practice of language education. Although a confrontation of Freire’s and Rancière’s perspectives has already been pursued by Tyson Lewis and Sarah Galloway,³ I try to complement their analyses by dealing extensively with one practice. In the third part, I criticize Galloway’s interpretation of a Rancièrian critical pedagogy, arguing that this practice is *in itself* emancipatory.

EMANCIPATORY EDUCATION THROUGH ALPHABETIZATION

Central to Freire’s thought is that learning and teaching methods do matter when the future of the world is at stake: preferring one pedagogy over another is not without major consequences vis-à-vis the way in which society is (to be) organized — that is, in a fair or in an oppressive way. In that respect, Freire heavily criticized

“the banking concept of education.”⁴ This concerns forms of teaching that overstress the role of the instructor and reduce the role of the student to that of a passive vessel who merely stores the contents deposited in his or her head — eliminating all creative potential. The gist of Freire’s criticism, however, is not the frequently endorsed view that traditional forms of classroom instruction are less motivating and efficacious than self-steered learning. He is not merely stating that we should create more stimulating contexts and optimize learning results by stimulating students to construct knowledge actively, autonomously and on the basis of the problems they experience as relevant themselves. His whole point is rather that a pedagogy that treats students as passive containers only contributes to the perpetuation of the existing, oppressive societal order. Therefore, Freire’s critique is not didactical, but fundamentally political.⁵ Conversely, he argues that active and creative engagement from students, as well as the reduction of the instructor’s role to that of a mere facilitator, constitute preconditions for fundamental social reform.

Faithful to his neo-Marxist inspiration, Freire argues that social inequality is rooted in a lack of (self-)consciousness: people endure exploitation because they do not possess a clear representation of their own lamentable position (nor of the changes education and collective action might instigate). Due to this absence of insight the oppressed are themselves the cause of their servitude. That is why reform is unlikely to happen. Traditional pedagogies support this status quo because they implicitly train students to become passive and uncritical beings who accommodate to existing societal structures. Therefore *pedagogical methods matter politically*. Even if teachers — out of the best of intentions — believe that the underprivileged might achieve liberty by instructing literacy skills insight in history and economics, for instance, they only incite them to unconsciously adopt a submissive attitude. Due to this passivity-oriented instruction, the oppressed grow ever more accustomed to a “culture of silence,” believing that resistance is futile (*PE*, 50).

Referring to the Brazilian context, where many quality-proven alphabetization programs just turned out to reproduce inequality, it could be said, first, that the manuals involved offer reading exercises that solely consist in “words and texts [that] have nothing to do with the actual experience of illiterate learners.” These concern expressions like “Eva saw the grape” and “John already knows how to read. Look at the happiness in his face. Now John will be able to find a job” (*PE*, 8–9). Second, pictures accompanying these phrases depict typically Eurocentric situations. Third, in order to learn to write, students are merely encouraged to repeat strings of letters and sounds that are in themselves nonsensical.

Again, Freire is not casting any doubt regarding the intentions behind these methods. But as such, literacy

is reduced to the mechanical act of “depositing” words, syllables and letters *into* illiterates. This “deposit” is sufficient as soon as the illiterate student attaches a magical meaning to the word and thus “affirms” himself or herself. Written or read, words are, as it were, amulets placed on a person who does not say them, but merely repeats them, almost always without any relation to the world and the things they name. (*PE*, 7)

In this quote Freire decries the absence of any connection between language and the concrete lives of illiterate students, with regard neither to content (which is far

removed from *their* own life-world) nor to form (students are drilled with artificially constructed letters and sounds, like “pa, pe, pi, po, pu”). Again, the point he raises is not didactical, but political: when language skills are acquired in this way, students are being refused the opportunity to contribute to their own emancipation. Even if this method succeeds in rendering them literate, they remain the victims of “verbalism.” They experience language as *just words and nothing beyond that*. Words are not experienced as a medium through which they really can “affirm” themselves. Written language will forever keep a distant and even “magical” character, and so students will never use their literacy for raising themselves above the oppressive situation they are in: they fail “to take history in hand and [to] make it themselves” (PE, 10).

In order to achieve *this*, Freire proposed an alternative, “critical” alphabetization program based on a system of “generative words” (PE, 56). This method implies that students are invited to pick out a set of themes that are relevant to them. This process, which is called “codification,” results in a selection of (seventeen) key-words, accompanied by a photographic/pictorial representation of day-to-day life-conditions (PE, 51). This 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. *Learning written language is never only about language*. This opening toward a broader conversation is supported by the syntactical form of the codified words, which ideally consist of three syllables (PE, 56). As such, these words can be broken down into smaller elements (*co-mi-da*, for example), which allows for the opportunity to build (“generate”) other words (starting here with *co-*), which represent other experiences students have in real life.

Alphabetization should run parallel with a profound discussion about issues that really matter, so that language is no longer experienced as something artificial, but as something “lived-through” — as a means of expression students may appropriate personally. Moreover, “[i]lliterate learners gradually begin to appreciate that, as human beings, to speak is not the same as ‘to utter a word’” (PE, 13). The skill they learn to master is not experienced as just a skill to add to a set of other skills. To acquire the possibility to read and to write *entirely* changes the students’ lives. They not only become conscious of their own oppression, but also awaken to their capacity for contestation and transformation of the world (through language).

EDUCATION AS AN INTRINSICALLY EMANCIPATORY TRANSFORMATION

It is not my intention to question the liberatory potential of the Freirean method. However, I would like to raise the question whether this concerns a form of *educational emancipation*. With this last term I refer to the view Rancière defends in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* — a view that at first sight is very similar to Freire’s own position. The cornerstone of Rancière’s argument is that everyone is equally intelligent.⁶ This does not concern an empirically verifiable truth-claim, but refers to one of two mutually exclusive attitudes that teachers, concerned with the emancipation of their students, might take. The first consists in acting according to the belief that there (obviously) exists a difference in intelligence between the

knowing teacher and the ignorant students. Teachers should therefore progressively enlighten students' minds by carefully explaining what they cannot understand by themselves, until they eventually reach the same level of intelligence. However, assuming that there is a gap in intelligence to bridge, students get caught in a vicious circle (*IS*, 4): after all, it is *only* the already enlightened master who is qualified to gauge to what extent this gap has been bridged. As such, inequality gets installed. Students are made to believe that someone else, more powerful, is required in order to become emancipated.

The second and less likely attitude to adopt consists in the willingness to accept that there is only one intelligence and that we all share it (*even if* there exist good scientific reasons to believe otherwise). As such, *the teacher marks a point in history*: the established order of things is radically interrupted. This is to say that one does not presuppose that the student is *in need of explanation* to understand a subject matter, but that he or she is able to understand it on his or her own. In that case, equality is no longer regarded as a goal to be reached, but *the affirmation of a basic condition*. It is *only* on this condition that true emancipation, which is eventually self-emancipation, takes place (*IS*, 13).⁷

This however does not imply the abandonment of all notion of “mastership.”⁸ For Rancière the hypothesis of the equality of intelligences does not rule out that there may exist inequality at the level of will — that is, the power to focus one's attention. Although no one lacks the capability for understanding the world, we all might (sometimes) lack the appropriate willpower to use our intelligence. When we suffer from this kind of distraction, a master might discipline our will, or disclose the world in such a way that we become attentive. In the case Rancière analyzes, this concerns a professor who is ignorant of the Dutch language, but who nevertheless succeeds in making his Dutch-speaking students successfully speak French, solely by demanding that they compare with the greatest attention and constant care two versions (French and Dutch) of the same text. Against all odds, this turned out to be sufficient to master a new language. This is of course a most extreme case, but in a sense any teacher who passionately cares for a certain subject matter, and who actually shows that it deserves attention, might allow for a similar thing to happen.

Therefore, equality of intelligences does not necessarily imply a student-centered approach. It rather entails a thing-centered pedagogy,⁹ which takes seriously the possibility that anyone who is attentive *can* become proficient in something. This thing, which students and teachers have “in common,” (*IS*, 22) rather than the teacher's authority, decides whether or not proficiency is attained. As such, students are granted the experience that they can learn without being dependent on a superior intellect. More positively stated: in becoming proficient in something, they affirm *that there is only one intelligence*. Using this intelligence, everyone may learn everything, at least when one allows the thing-in-common to possess authority. In the traditional case of textbook education, the book fulfills this role: “[the] book is the equality of intelligence.” The “materiality of things” guarantees radical equality. Therefore it even makes sense to speak about “the democracy of the book” (*IS*, 38).

A thing-oriented pedagogy is therefore *in and of itself emancipatory*. However, this does not solely or predominantly concern the suspension of the traditional power imbalance between teacher and student. It also concerns emancipation in a more general sense: *that there is no necessity in an existing, established distribution of societal roles and that everything can begin anew*. Indeed, even the poor and wretched can learn to read and write, just like the carpenter's daughter may become a civil engineer. However, what is at stake here is *not really* that all may become civil engineers: this would give rise to a different debate, not only because a society without carpenters is not desirable, but also because according to such a view, the craftsman's position is regarded as inferior in the end. What is at stake is rather that, when students learn some-thing (whether this is carpentry or engineering), they verify *that they are equal* (or even that *all* are equal). What matters is that the vicious circle of positioning individuals according to an established societal logic (and of defining what they can and cannot do accordingly) is broken. This means that emancipation is not the stable outcome of a learning process, but a concrete intervention, or better an *event*. Emancipation is not a result ever to be reached, nor something for which to continually strive. Emancipation is rather the hallmark of true education taking place: it refers to the inherent possibility in educational processes to transform oneself, regardless of an existing ordering of societal life. This only requires *that one cares for the world* — or perhaps (to paraphrase Hannah Arendt) that one loves the world enough.¹⁰

THING-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY AND EDUCATIONAL EMANCIPATION

In short, Rancière does not define emancipation as is customary — namely, in terms of (successfully) escaping social oppression — but in terms of a significant educational (self)transformation. At the same time this concerns an affirmation of unconditional equality. Therefore social reform *might be* implied. Perhaps it is more adequate to say that *educational* emancipation can be a condition for *social* emancipation, but that these two terms are not identical. Freire's alphabetization program, however, reduces the first to the second. Here, what is being learned (literacy skills) is *only valuable* in relation to the realization of (more) social justice. As an educational activity, learning to read and to write lacks any *intrinsic* significance.

I should immediately admit that Freire is himself sensitive to this problem, as he explicitly criticizes the (all too) common idea that alphabetization and emancipation of the disenfranchised should relate to one another as cause and effect. First, mastering the skill of writing and reading constitutes *itself* an authentic moment of self-emancipation: “[o]ne must not think ... that learning to read and write precedes conscientization, or vice versa. Conscientization occurs simultaneously with the literacy or postliteracy process.”¹¹ As I stressed before, Freire's approach is political rather than didactical: he is not interested in optimizing learning outcomes. In that sense education has a value of its own. Moreover, Freire criticizes the opinion, typically held by the privileged classes, that literacy programs are a therapy for curing an illness or a tool to eradicate a poisonous herb (*PE*, 9–10). This view immediately positions the illiterate as subjects who are fully dependent on the

(already emancipated) other. In this way, it becomes difficult for students to understand their edification as genuine *self*-emancipation.¹²

Nevertheless, in the end Freire leaves no room for a strongly *educational* view on emancipation. This becomes clear when we confront his idea of *education for social reform* with Rancière's more radical view of *educational emancipation* — that is, emancipation as inherent to a thing-oriented and equality-based education. In other words, although Freire strongly believes that alphabetization is an indispensable vehicle for social justice, which elevates education above the status of a mere didactical means, there is for him at the same time no intrinsic emancipation in experiencing being able to read or to write a (new) language. In that sense, education appears as something of *instrumental* significance only. In the remaining part of this essay, I substantiate this claim by turning to Susan Galloway's recent interpretation of Rancière through a Freirean lens. In a sense she attempts to merge both perspectives, which ultimately leads to an instrumental account of education. In contrast to this, I argue for a Rancierian critical pedagogy beyond any instrumentalism.

First, elaborating the idea that literally every-*thing* (be it carpentry or engineering) grants opportunities for self-emancipation, Galloway argues that it therefore does not matter *what* one learns. She states more precisely that

the [emancipatory] teacher uses what Rancière describes as “the book”: a text or picture that mediates between the intelligence of the teacher and that of the student, preventing the teacher from explicating and discouraging the student from claiming that they do not understand. Here the purpose is not for teachers to reveal knowledge about the world, but to reveal intelligence to itself, so *the content is irrelevant to emancipation* and any text or picture could be used.¹³

I would say that this account is not at all Rancière's, but on the contrary a depiction of Freire's method — that is, raising self-consciousness in confrontation with codified pictures and words. Here emancipation (and social equality) is still defined as a purpose external to the engagement with a specific content. As such the letters and words one learns have no real authority.

Second, in her reading of Rancière from a Freirean perspective, Galloway rightfully raises the question why we should call practices, wherein learners and teachers relate to one another as equals, “educational.” After all, if ultimately emancipation is at stake, why does it matter whether this transformation takes place within or without relations/contexts that are traditionally called educational? But, in looking for a way out of this predicament, she argues that Rancière solves this difficulty (whereas Freire failed to do this), by “conceptualizing an emancipation that is reliant upon a relation of will against will between teacher and student, so preserving an educational relation.”¹⁴ By pointing out to an inequality qua willpower between teacher and student, the difference between this and forms of social transformation that happen in non-educational contexts is legitimized — so Galloway claims.

To be clear, I am neither denying that for Rancière inequality at the level of the will is as essential to the educational as is the equality of intelligences, nor that there

exists a particularly *educational* form of emancipation (which is the core of my criticism of Freire). But, what Galloway fails to acknowledge is *that the subject matter does matter* and that precisely this makes emancipation under conditions of intellectual equality *truly educational*. The equality between students and teachers — but for the same matter between students among themselves (in spite of social, cultural, gender and other differences between them) — results from an equality vis-à-vis “the thing,” i.e. the subject matter we all have in common. *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. Only in relation to this “thing,” they might experience to “become proficient.”

Of course, one only becomes proficient *in relation to something*. What is at stake is that students transform themselves according to the demands a particular subject matter places on them. Only then might they experience *a strong affirmation of potentiality*, which has the power to suspend all social order. Only then might they experience that everything might begin anew. For emancipation to take place, the authority of the teacher as possessing a privilege over knowledge should be abandoned, but at the same time the subject matter one focuses one’s attention on should get all authority itself.¹⁵

Third, when Galloway goes deeper into the concrete learning and teaching activities proposed by Freire and Rancière, she also has to deal with the latter’s stress on repetition, rehearsal, and drill. When Rancière portrays the alphabetization of the young child as an emancipatory act, (*IS*, 22) he refers exactly to those techniques that Freire so much detests, because they prevent a connection with real-life conditions of the people to be emancipated and because they install a distant and even “magical” attitude vis-à-vis (written) language. It seems that the Rancièrian method testifies to a banking concept of education. Now, Galloway avoids this possible contradiction between Freire and Rancière by admitting the “boring” character of repetitive activities like repeating the alphabet, but at the same time by seeing here once more demonstrated that the will of the emancipatory teacher is required (to make the student do something she or he would never do spontaneously).¹⁶ In other words: it is as if she has to defend Rancière against Freire’s objections, to which she clearly agrees, and the gist of her defense is that in the name of true emancipation obsolete practices are *nevertheless* legitimate.

A completely different point-of-view consists in saying that real attention and care for something require repetition, rehearsal, and drill. This is to say that I would like to question, with Rancière, Freire’s at-first-sight convincing argument that these pedagogical techniques instigate an artificial and a not-really engaged (“magical”) relation to what is learned, because what happens just is not interesting. However, according to Rancière educational emancipation precisely consists in suspending individual interest in favor of a full attention for the “thing” — that is, the subject matter to be learned, in confrontation with which *everyone* might transform him- or herself. And, repetition, rehearsal, and drill are heavily physical (and often collective) activities that precisely embody the very idea that our own interests (or at least what we spontaneously consider as interesting) does not count.

It is “the thing” that matters (as in a language that can be built out of a set of graphemes like “pa, pe, pi, po, pu”) and that requires strenuous exercise (repetition of these graphemes in an ordered way, as in the alphabet). That is also why it does not pose a problem that, in the case Rancière analyzes, students have to study a seventeenth-century novel that is far removed from their immediate interests.

So, learning written language, 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 (by a process of codification). Alphabetization through the drill of the alphabet therefore attests more to a love of (written) language, than the Freirean method does. When this concrete pedagogical technique suspends private interests, it is no longer from *his or her particular perspective* that the student approaches written language. In that sense educational emancipation is the affirmation, not only of the particular student’s equality, but of the idea that *all are equal* (in relation to [written] language).

In conclusion, Galloway presents an account of Rancière, which is actually a classical and instrumental account of critical pedagogy, as exemplified by Freire. Therefore she misses out on a more radical version of emancipatory pedagogy, which I have tried to develop throughout this contribution. Whereas for Freire and Galloway *it does not 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 does not 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. When pedagogy starts from individual interests it eventually gets caught up in the order of the necessary: the whole idea of a distribution of societal roles remains untouched. It is only by abolishing interest that the order of the necessary might be interrupted and that the truly new may come into existence.

1. For a definition of this school of thought, see Nicholas C. Burbules and Rupert Berk, “Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits,” in *Critical Theories in Education*, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999).

2. With the growing success of digital forms of learning, it can of course be doubted whether in the future alphabetization will keep this central role.

3. Tyson Lewis, “Messianic Pedagogy,” *Educational Theory* 60, no. 2 (2010): 231–248; Tyson Lewis, “Education in the Realm of the Senses: Understanding Paulo Freire’s Aesthetic Unconscious through Jacques Rancière,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 2 (2009): 285–299; and Sarah Galloway, “Reconsidering Emancipatory Education: Staging a Conversation Between Paulo Freire and Jacques Rancière,” *Educational Theory* 62, no. 2 (2012): 163–184.

4. See Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1993).

5. See Paolo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*, trans. Donaldo Macedo (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1985), 10. This work will be cited as *PE* in the text for all subsequent references.

6. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 18. This text will be cited as *IS* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. Like Freire, Rancière is not interested in knowing/proving which didactics are the most efficacious as regards learning outcomes.

8. Otherwise, it would have been quite ironic to use “five *lessons* in intellectual emancipation” as a subtitle for his book.
9. This concept is elaborated by Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, “The Hatred of Public Schooling: the School as the Mark of Democracy,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42, no. 5/6 (2010): 666–682.
10. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 196.
11. *Ibid.*, 59. This point is also recognized by Lewis (see, “Messianic Pedagogy,” 245) who argues, along with Giorgio Agamben, that the “educational time” of the Freirean pedagogy does not refer to a time experienced in view of a (transcendent) point still to be reached, but to a “praxis of the now.” However, Lewis also argues that *ultimately* Freire fails at circumventing a functional approach of education (246).
12. Compare with Gert Biesta’s criticism of the critical tradition in “A New Logic of Emancipation: The Methodology of Jacques Rancière,” *Educational Theory* 60, no. 1 (2010): 39–59.
13. Galloway, “Reconsidering Emancipatory Education,” 182 (emphasis added).
14. *Ibid.*, 183.
15. Again, there is a connection here with Arendt who also argues that authority (in relation to love for the world) is presupposed for true transformation to take place.
16. Galloway, “Reconsidering Emancipatory Education,” 177.