

Learner, Student, Speaker: Why it matters how we call those we teach¹

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss three different ways in which we can refer to those we teach: as learner, as student or as speaker. My interest is not in any aspect of teaching but in the question whether there can be such a thing as emancipatory education. Working with ideas from Jacques Rancière I offer the suggestion that emancipatory education can be characterised as education which starts from the assumption that all students can speak. It starts from the assumption, in other words, that students neither lack a capacity for speech, nor that they are producing noise. The idea of the student as a speaker is not offered as an empirical fact but as a different starting point for emancipatory education, one that positions equality at the beginning of education, not at its end.

Keywords: learner, students, speaker, emancipation, democracy, democratic education, politics, Rancière

A learner is not a shedhand or barrower, but a budding shearer who has not yet shorn 5,000 sheep (10,000 in Queensland). (Gunn, 1965, p. 35)

Here are some simple questions: How should we call those who are the subjects of education? What follows if we use a particular word to refer to them? And does that matter? In this paper I start from the assumption that it does indeed matter how we refer to those who are subject to education. This is not because language has some kind of mysterious power, but more simply because words are connected to other words, so that using one particular word leads more easily to some words than to others. It is not, therefore, a matter of underlying assumptions, as this would suggest a distinction between surface and depth, but of pathways of meaning and association. Such pathways enact a particular ‘distribution of the sensible’, a particular distribution of what is ‘capable of being apprehended by the senses’ (Rancière, 2004, p. 85), and in doing so articulate a particular relation between ways of saying, ways of doing, and ways of being. And that is why our words matter.

Learner

The English language has several words to refer to those who are the subjects of education. Some of those words map rather neatly onto similar words in other languages,

although other languages also have words that cannot that easily be translated into English.² For this paper I am particularly interested in one of the words used to designate those who are the subjects of education, which is the word ‘learner’. If my analysis is correct—and there is empirical support for my thesis (see Haugsbakk & Nordkvelle 2007)—the word ‘learner’ has over the past two or three decades rapidly gained prominence in the English-speaking world. We can see this in policy-documents, in educational research and in everyday speech about education (see Biesta, 2004; 2009a). The rise of the word ‘learner’ is part of the emergence of what I have termed ‘the new language of learning’—a language which refers to students as learners, to teachers as facilitators of learning, to schools as places for learning, to vocational education as the learning and skills sector, to grown ups as adult learners, and so on. The ambition articulated in the language of learning can partly be understood as an emancipatory one, in that it can be interpreted as an attempt to shift the emphasis away from teachers, curricula, schools and other ‘input factors’ to the activities and identities of those who are supposed to benefit from this. The rise of the language of learning and of the designation of students as learners can thus, in a sense, be seen as an attempt to liberate the learner—first and foremost from the teacher but also from the wider educational system. But this gain is also a loss. Why is that so?

We can start from the simple observation that in order to call someone a learner there must be something for this person to learn. This ‘something’ can be almost anything: knowledge, values, understandings, skills, dispositions, capacities, competencies, criticality, identity, autonomy, and so on—as long as it can be learned. What matters in calling someone a learner is, however, not about what it is that needs to be learned; what matters is the fact that the learner is constructed in terms of a *lack*. The learner is the one who is missing something. The learner is the one who is not yet complete. Perhaps after shearing ten sheep one may well feel competent as a sheep shearer, but it takes another 4990 sheep—and in Queensland even 9990 sheep—before one loses the identity of a learner. In the UK the learner identity is very visible when one is a so-called ‘learner-driver’, as this requires that one attaches ‘learner plates’ to one’s car—a big ‘L’ at the front and a big ‘L’ at the back—until one has gained formal authorisation to drive a motor vehicle. Calling students ‘learners’ or referring to grown ups as ‘adult learners’ is not fundamentally different from this. It basically means that we attach learner plates to them in order to indicate that they are *not yet*—not yet knowledgeable, not yet skilful, not yet competent, not yet autonomous, and so on. It is difficult to see that as just a case of liberation.

To call someone a learner thus suggests an inequality between those who have learned and now know, can, or are, and those who still need to learn in order to know, be able, or be. This, in itself, is not a problem. If one wishes to shear sheep or drive a car, there are indeed things that must be learned and skills that must be mastered. Once this has been done successfully we can consider ourselves equal to those who already know and can. Problems arise when it is claimed that the trajectory from ignorance to knowledge or from inability to ability *necessarily* requires the intervention of an educator on the assumption that the learner is not yet capable to learn by himself. Whereas there is, therefore, a weak construction of the learner as the one who needs to learn something he does not yet know or is able to do, there is also a strong construction of the learner as the

one who is not able to learn for himself, that is, *without* the intervention of an educator. This strong construction of the learner suggests a more fundamental lack. Here the learner is not simply lacking what it is that needs to be learned; here the learner is lacking the very *capacity* to learn without the intervention of the educator. The arguments for this idea are well known to educators. They are basically of two kinds: developmental and curricular. The developmental argument says that the child has not yet developed sufficiently in order to be able to learn this particular thing. It says, for example, that the child's intelligence has not yet sufficiently matured or that we're waiting for the frontal lobes to catch up. The curricular argument says that the subject matter is too difficult to be understood as it is; it therefore needs to be broken down by the teacher into smaller bits, and then sequenced in such a way that, step by step, the learner will be able to reach understanding. Thus we put learners onto educational respirators for the time being—that is, until they can breath for themselves. Until that moment the main task of the teacher is to explain to the learner what the learner cannot yet understand for himself.

Explanation thus offers itself 'as a means to reduce the situation of inequality where those who know nothing are in relation with those who know' (Rancière, in press). But does it? Explanation may well give the impression that it does. Many will have experienced a situation in which something was explained to them and, upon hearing this, they said 'I see'. But it was not that the explicator could see this for them and just handed it over to them—they still had to see it for themselves. Perhaps then what is communicated through the act of explanation is not the explanation itself—in order to understand, the learner still has to figure out for himself what is being explained to him—but the idea that explanation is *indispensable*, i.e. that the learner is unable to understand *without* explanation. This is the point Jacques Rancière makes when he suggests that '(t)o explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself' (Rancière, 1991, p. 6). To explain, in other words, 'is to *demonstrate* an incapacity' (Rancière, in press; emphasis added).

Rather than bridging the gap between the one who does not know and the one who knows, rather than transforming inequality into equality, explanation actually enacts and in a sense inaugurates and then perpetually confirms this inequality (see Derycke and Bingham in this Issue). It is not so much, therefore, that a learner is the one who needs explanation; it is rather that the act of explanation constitutes the learner as the one who is unable to learn *without* explanation, *without* the intervention of a 'master-explicator'. The learner is, in other words, the *product* of the 'explicative order' (Rancière, 1991, p. 4), not its condition. The explicative order is founded upon the 'myth of pedagogy', which is 'the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid' (Rancière, 1991, p. 6). The explicator's 'special trick' here consists of a 'double inaugural gesture' (*ibid.*, p. 6). 'On the one hand, he decrees the absolute beginning: it is only now that the act of learning will begin. On the other, having thrown a veil of ignorance over everything that is to be learned, he appoints himself to the task of lifting it' (*ibid.*, pp. 6–7). The intention behind this is generally a laudable one, as the teacher aims 'to transmit his knowledge to his students so as to bring them, by degrees, to his own level of expertise' (*ibid.*, p. 3). The 'art' of the schoolmaster, 'who methodically lifts the veil from that which the student could not understand alone, is the art that promises the student will one day be the equal of the

schoolmaster' (Rancière, in press). But will this promise ever be delivered? Is it ever possible to escape from the circle of explanation? Or is it the case that as soon as one starts out on a trajectory of explanation, one will be there forever, always trying to catch up, always trying to understand what the explicator already understands, but always in need of the explicator's explanation in order to understand? Viewed in this way explanation 'is something completely different from a practical means of reaching some end' but rather appears to be an end in itself. Explanation is 'the infinite verification of a fundamental axiom: the axiom of inequality' (Rancière, in press). Is it the case, therefore, that as soon as one becomes a learner one has automatically become a *lifelong* learner?

Student

Is it possible to break away from the circle of powerlessness 'that ties the student to the explicator' (Rancière, 1991, p. 15)? It is possible to engage in education in such a way that it emancipates rather than stultifies? Perhaps. But the way to do this is not through the introduction of more 'refined' or more 'progressive' forms of explanation. 'The distinction between "stultification" and "emancipation" is not a distinction between methods of instruction. It is not a distinction between traditional or authoritarian methods, on the one hand, and new or active methods, on the other: stultification can and does happen in all kinds of active and modern ways' (Rancière, in press). Is it possible, therefore, to teach without explanation? In his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Jacques Rancière makes a case that this is possible and, more importantly, that it is only when we engage in teaching *without* explanation that it may be possible to emancipate rather than stultify. How might that be done?

The central figure in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is Joseph Jacotot, an exiled French schoolteacher who, in the first decades of the 19th century developed an educational approach called 'universal teaching'. Jacotot's approach stemmed from a discovery he made when he was invited to teach French to Flemish students whose language he didn't speak. What was peculiar about this situation was that there was 'no language in which he could teach them what they sought from him' (Rancière, 1991, p. 1). There was, in other words, no language that would allow Jacotot to *explain* anything to his students. Nonetheless his students did manage to learn to speak and write French. They did this through studying a bilingual edition of Fénelon's novel *Télémaque* under Jacotot's insistence to do so—and the latter is crucial in Rancière's argument. Rancière emphasises that while Jacotot didn't teach his students anything—what they learned was learned through their own engagement with the book—this didn't mean that they learned without a master. They only learned without a 'master *explicator*' (ibid., p. 12; emphasis added). 'Jacotot had taught them something [but] he had communicated nothing to them' (ibid., p. 13), and in this respect he was an ignorant schoolmaster, a schoolmaster who didn't claim to have any superior insight or understanding that is necessary for his students to learn and gain this understanding themselves. What he had taught them—or perhaps we should say: what he had *demonstrated* to them—was their capacity to learn for themselves. And the way he had done this was by summoning his students to use their intelligence.

The relationship between Jacotot and his students was, therefore, not a relationship of intelligence to intelligence but of ‘will to will’ (ibid., p. 13). ‘By leaving his intelligence out of the picture, [Jacotot] had allowed [his students’] intelligence to grapple with that of the book’ (ibid., p. 13). Whereas stultification takes place ‘whenever one intelligence is subordinated to another’, emancipation takes place when an intelligence obeys only itself ‘even while the will obeys another will’ (ibid., p. 13). What is at the heart of emancipatory education, therefore, is the act of revealing ‘an intelligence to itself’ (ibid., p. 28). What this requires from the student is attention, i.e. ‘absolute attention for seeing and seeing again, saying and repeating’ (ibid., p. 23). The route that students will take when summoned to use their intelligence is unknown, but what the student cannot escape, Rancière argues, is ‘the exercise of his liberty’ and this is summoned by a three-part question ‘What do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it? And so on, to infinity’ (ibid., p. 23).

There are therefore only two ‘fundamental acts’ for the schoolmaster: ‘He *interrogates*, he demands speech, that is to say, the manifestation of an intelligence that wasn’t aware of itself or that had given up’ and ‘he *verifies* that the work of the intelligence is done with attention’ (ibid., p. 29; emphasis in original).³ Rancière emphasises that this interrogation should not be understood in the Socratic way where the sole purpose of interrogation is to lead the student to a point that is already known by the master. While this ‘may be the path to learning’ it is ‘in no way a path to emancipation’ (ibid., p. 29). Central to emancipation is the consciousness ‘of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself’ (ibid., p. 39). This is what constantly needs to be verified, i.e. ‘the principle of the equality of all speaking beings’ (ibid., p. 39), the belief that ‘there is no hierarchy of *intellectual capacity*’ but only ‘inequality in the *manifestations* of intelligence’ (ibid., p. 27). Emancipation is therefore not something ‘*given* by scholars, by their explications *at the level of* the people’s intelligence’—emancipation is always ‘emancipation seized, even against the scholars, when one teaches oneself’ (ibid., p. 99). The only thing that is needed here is to summon other people to use their intelligence. After all, ‘(w)hat stultifies the common people is not the lack of instruction, but the belief in the inferiority of their intelligence’ (ibid., p. 39). ‘The emancipatory teacher’s call forbids the supposed ignorant one the satisfaction of what is known, the satisfaction of admitting that one is incapable of knowing more’ (Rancière, in press). The only thing that is needed, therefore, is to remind people that they can see and think for themselves and are not dependent upon others who claim that they can see and think for them.

Jacotot’s approach is therefore not anti-authoritarian. It is not an approach that tries to liberate the learner by taking the authority of the educator out of the picture so that education dissolves into learning—either individual learning or collective learning. The educator is still there, but not as an explicator, not as a superior intelligence, but as a will, as someone who demands the effort from the student and verifies that an effort has been made. ‘The ignorant person will learn by himself what the master doesn’t know if the master believes he can and obliges him to realize his capacity’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 15). This at once changes the identity of the one who is the subject of education. It is no longer a learner, it is no longer someone whose intelligence is subordinated to another and therefore needs explanation in order to be ‘lifted up’ to the level of the explicator.⁴

The one who is the subject of education is summoned to *study* and thus, in the most literal sense, has become a *student*.

Speaker

It is tempting to read Rancière's ideas in psychological terms and understand it as a theory of teaching and learning. From that angle there are, on the one hand, some startling claims that seem to fly in the face of what we know, for example, about child development or about curriculum and instruction. On the other hand there are some more familiar ideas that seem to resonate with constructivist views about how people learn. But Rancière's point is actually not about 'a better pedagogy' but about an entirely different route—'that of *liberty*' (Rancière, 1991, p. 14; emphasis added). Rancière's point is a political one and *therefore* a thoroughly educational point—that is, if we see education, unlike schooling in the narrower sense, as being concerned with emancipation and freedom (see Biesta, 2007a).⁵ And the question that is at stake in all this is a very simple one: Who can speak?

Again, this question should not be read in psychological terms. The question here is not about who has the ability or capacity to speak—which would at the same time suggest that there are some who are disabled or incapacitated in the domain of speech. The question of who can speak is, in a sense, about who is *allowed* to speak. But the 'in a sense' is important here, as we shouldn't read 'being allowed' in terms of the master who claims the power to decide whether his learners are allowed to open their mouth or not. Such a reading would locate the question as to who can speak within the framework of a philosophy and politics of recognition (Honneth, 1996). Such a philosophy, however, still starts from the assumption of inequality—where some claim the power to let others speak and where some see themselves as in need of recognition by powerful others before they feel they can speak—and hence is still reproducing the very inequality and exclusion it seeks to overcome (see also Biesta, 2007b; 2009b). This is another way, then, of depicting what happens under the 'explicative order', as we can see explanation as the attempt to bring those who are considered as not yet able to speak to a level of reason and understanding where they can begin to speak in a way that is considered to 'make sense'. Viewing things in this way not only suggests that learners start out by making 'noise' rather than producing 'voice'. It also implies that they need a master to explain to them what their noise actually means. To gain voice in this way would mean that the master needs to tell the learners what they are thinking and saying—which at the very same time 'overwrites' their own thought and speech and thus denies them their 'capacity' for thinking and speaking. To say that the question as to who can speak is about who is 'allowed' to speak, is therefore not about trying to point at someone who has the power to let others speak, but refers to a particular 'distribution of the sensible' in which some 'sound' exists as 'noise' and other 'sound' exists as 'voice'. And Rancière's point is that wherever there is such a division, it is not a natural division but a contingent historical one.

Rancière refers to such a distribution of the sensible as 'police' or 'police order' (in French: '*la police*' and '*l'ordre policier*'). In a way reminiscent of Foucault, Rancière defines police as 'an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being,

and ways of saying, and that sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task' (Rancière, 1999, p. 29) (see also Ruitenberg and Simons/Massschelein in this Issue). It is an order 'of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise' (ibid.). Police should not be understood as the way in which the state structures the life of society. It is also not, in Habermasian terms, the 'grip' of the system on the life-world, but includes *both*. 'The distribution of places and roles that defines a police regime stems as much from the assumed spontaneity of social relations as from the rigidity of state functions' (ibid.). 'Policing' is therefore not so much about 'the 'disciplining; of bodies' as that it is 'a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of *occupations* and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed' (ibid., p. 29, emphasis in original). One way to read this definition of police is to see it as an order that is *all-inclusive* in that everyone has a particular place, role or position in it and that there is an identity for everyone (see Biesta, 2007b; 2009b). This is not to say that everyone is included in the running of the order. The point simply is that everyone is identified in some way in terms of the order. After all, women, children, slaves and immigrants had a clear place in the democracy of Athens, viz., as those who were not allowed to participate in political decision-making and who had no voice in the running of the *polis*—as parts that had no part. It is in this particular way that every police order is all-inclusive, although it doesn't mean that everyone can speak, can generate voice, in such an all-inclusive order.

Rancière explicitly distinguishes police from what in English translation is usually referred to as *politics* (in French: '*la politique*' as distinct from '*le politique*' which denotes the general field of the political). Politics refers to 'the mode of acting that perturbs this arrangement [of the police order]' (Rancière, 2003, p. 226) and that does so with reference to equality. Rancière thus reserves the term 'politics' 'for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration' (Rancière, 1999, pp. 29–30). This break is manifest in a series of actions 'that reconfigure the space where parties, parts, or lack of parts have been defined' (ibid., p. 30). Political activity so conceived is 'whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it. [...] It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise' (ibid., p. 30).

(P)olitical activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order [and] the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being. (ibid., p. 30)

Politics thus refers to the event when two 'heterogeneous processes' meet: the police process and the process of *equality* (see ibid.). The latter has to do with 'an open set of practices driven by the assumption of equality between any and every speaking being and by the concern to test this equality' (ibid.). Rancière refers to the meeting of these processes as 'dissensus'. Dissensus, therefore, is not the 'opposition of interests or opinions', but 'the production, within a determined, sensible world, of a given that is

heterogeneous to it' (Rancière, 2003, p. 226). Dissensus, to put it differently, 'is not primarily a quarrel, but is a gap in the very configuration of sensible concepts, a dissociation introduced into the correspondence between ways of being and ways of doing, seeing, and speaking' (Rancière in press). This means that '(e) quality is enacted within the social machine through dissensus' (ibid.). Rancière gives the example of Jeanne Deroin who, in 1849, presented herself as a candidate for a legislative election in which she could not run. Through this 'she demonstrates the contradiction within a universal suffrage that excludes her sex from any such universality' (Rancière, 1999, p. 41). It is the staging 'of the very contradiction between police logic and political logic' that makes this into a political "act" (ibid.). It is the 'bringing into relationship of two unconnected things [that] becomes the measure of what is incommensurable between two orders' and this produces both 'new inscriptions of equality within liberty and a fresh sphere of visibility for further demonstrations' (ibid., p. 42). This is why for Rancière politics is not made up of power relationships but of 'relationships between worlds' (ibid.).

Dissensus can thus be seen as an act of subjectification, an act in and through which a subject—and perhaps we can say in a more general sense: subjectivity—comes 'into presence' (see Biesta, 2006). Rancière describes subjectification as 'the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience' (Rancière, 1999, p. 35). Subjectification is therefore different from identification (see Rancière, 1995, p. 37). Identification is about taking up an existing identity, that is, a way of being and speaking and of being identifiable and visible that is already possible within the existing order. Subjectification, on the other hand, is always 'disidentification, removal from the naturalness of a place' (ibid., p. 36). Subjectification 'inscribes a subject name as being different from any identified part of the community' (ibid., p. 37). Subjectification is about the appearance, a 'coming into presence', of a way of being that had no place and no part in the existing order of things. Subjectification is therefore a *supplement* to the existing order because it adds something to it; and precisely for this reason the supplement also *divides* and redistributes the existing order, the existing division or distribution of the sensible (see Rancière, 2003, pp. 224–225).⁶ Subjectification thus 'redefines the field of experience that gave to each their identity with their lot' (Rancière, 1995, p. 40). It 'decomposes and recomposes the relationships between the ways of *doing*, of *being* and of *saying* that define the perceptible organization of the community' (ibid.; emphasis in original).

The distinction between identification and subjectification therefore suggests that there are two ways in which individuals can speak—or perhaps we might say: can come to speech (see also Hallward, 2005, and Ruitenberg in this Issue). On the one hand we can speak *within* a particular distribution of the sensible. In that case speaking is a matter of identification, of taking up an existing identity, an existing place within the existing order. On the other hand speaking can be an act of subjectification if, that is, it is not about taking up an identity that is already waiting for us, but if our speaking is supplementary to the existing distribution of the sensible and introduces an element that is heterogeneous to the existing distribution of the sensible in order to 'test' the equality of

any and every speaking being. The difference between the two ways in which we can come to speech—identification and subjectification—is perhaps less sharp than it at first appears. At one level it is only the latter kind of speech—speaking as subjectification—that seems to have the power to ‘decompose and recompose’ a particular distribution of the sensible and that, in this sense, can count as speech with political ‘effects’ in the sense in which Rancière defines politics. It is the kind of speech that produces ‘new inscriptions of equality’ within the police order (Rancière, 1999, p. 42).

But the ‘force’ of such inscriptions of equality is not only a matter of quality but also of quantity. Speech as subjectification also produces new and different opportunities for identification—it produces ‘a fresh sphere of visibility *for further demonstrations*’ (ibid.; emphasis added)—and such identifications add to what we might call the ‘force’ of the initial political ‘act’. Speaking as identification is therefore not necessarily without political significance. What matters is whether the identification is with ‘inscriptions of equality’ within the police order or not. The idea of ‘inscriptions of equality’ therefore also indicates that we should not think of the distinction between the police order and politics in moral terms, i.e. as ‘bad’ versus ‘good’ or as ‘not having to do with equality’ and as ‘having to do with equality’. Rancière (1999, pp. 30–31) emphasises that ‘(t)here is a worse and a better police’—which is why institutions matter and why speech as identification can have political significance too. The better police is, however, not the one ‘that adheres to the supposedly natural order of society or the science of legislators’, but the one ‘that all the breaking and entering perpetrated by egalitarian logic has most jolted out of its “natural” logic’ (ibid., p. 31). Rancière thus acknowledges that the police order ‘can produce all sorts of good, and one kind of police may be infinitely preferable to another’ (p. 31). But whether police order is ‘sweet and kind’ does not make it any less the opposite of politics.

When we refer to those who are the subjects of education as ‘learners’ we immediately put them in a position where they still have to learn and where their learning is considered to be dependent upon our explanation. Hence, we are saying that they cannot yet speak. We are saying that, for the moment, until the ‘end’ of education has arrived, they can only produce noise and that it is only as a result of our explanation of the meaning of their noise that they can come to speech—which, as I have argued above, means that they will never be able to come to their *own* speech. When we refer to those who are the subjects of education as ‘students’, we start from the assumption that they can learn *without* our explanations, without the need for educational ‘respiration’. In this sense we enact—and perhaps we could add: inaugurate—a different relationship, one of will to will, not of intelligence to intelligence. In doing so, we are denying that our students should acquire a new, an additional intelligence—that of the master’s explications (see Rancière, 1991, p. 8)—and it is this what is implied in Rancière’s insistence that emancipatory education starts from the assumption of the equality of intelligence of all human beings. This does not mean ‘that all the actions of all intelligences are the same’, but rather highlights ‘that there is only one intelligence at work in all intellectual training’ (Rancière, in press). Emancipatory schoolmasters do nothing more (but also nothing less) than demanding that their students make use of their intelligence. They forbid ‘the supposed ignorant one the satisfaction [...] of admitting that one is incapable of knowing more’ (ibid.). But just to say that our students should study is not yet enough.

There is, after all, a critical distinction to be made between those who become students of the explications of others—and the world is full of such explications—and those who follow their own ‘orbits’ (for this word see Rancière, 1991, p. 59). What matters, therefore, is not so much that students study but that they *speak*. As Rancière suggests, our intelligence’s ‘leading virtue [is] the poetic virtue’ (ibid., p. 64). ‘In the act of speaking, man doesn’t transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same’ (ibid., p. 65). This is why the emancipatory schoolmaster ‘demands speech, that is to say, the manifestation of an intelligence that wasn’t aware of itself or that had given up’ (ibid., p. 29).

Emancipatory education can therefore be characterised as education that starts from the assumption that all students can speak—or to be more precise: that all students can *already* speak. It starts from the assumption that students neither lack a capacity for speech, nor that they are producing noise. It starts from the assumption, in other words, that students already are *speakers*. This is not, of course, how the advocates of the explicative order would see it. ‘They suppose a little animal who, bumping into things, explores a world that he isn’t yet able to see and will only discern when they teach him to do so’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 11). The emancipatory schoolmaster, on the other hand, starts from the assumption that ‘the human child is first of all a speaking being’ (ibid.). ‘The child who repeats the words he hears and the Flemish student “lost” in his *Télémaque* are not proceeding hit or miss. All their effort, all their exploration, is strained toward this: someone has addressed words to them that they want to recognize and respond to, not as students or as learned men, but as people; in the way you respond to someone speaking to you and not to someone examining you: under the sign of equality’ (ibid.).

Surely, the sounds newborns make are quite alien to our ears. But when we classify such sounds as noise, we are not stating a psychological fact but are introducing a political distinction. We are saying that they lack the capacity to speak and are thereby suggesting that they need to be told what their sounds mean—which also means that we put ourselves in the position to be able to tell them this. In that case we start from the assumption of inequality and are thus caught in the circle of powerlessness. The alternative is not to try to compensate for or bridge inequality, but simply to start from somewhere else, that is from the assumption of the equality of all speaking beings. ‘The circle of power [...] can only take effect by being made public’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 15). ‘Equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is *verified*’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 137). But it can only appear ‘as a tautology or an absurdity’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 15) because it introduces an element that is heterogeneous to the circle of powerlessness. To start from the assumption that students *are* speakers is, therefore, ‘the most difficult leap’ (ibid., p. 16), but ‘(o)ne must dare to recognize it and pursue the *open* verification of its power’ (ibid.; emphasis in original).

To start from the assumption of the equality of all speaking beings is not to assume, naively, that equality *exists*. It is not to assume that one has a special insight into how inequality exists and how it can be transformed into equality. ‘About inequality’, as Rancière writes, ‘there is nothing to know. Inequality is no more a given to be transformed by knowledge than equality is an end to be transmitted through knowledge. Equality and inequality are not two states. They are two “opinions”, that is to say two

distinct axioms, by which educational training can operate, two axioms that have nothing in common. All that one can do is verify the axiom one is given. The schoolmaster's explanatory logic presents inequality axiomatically. [...] The ignorant schoolmaster's logic poses equality as an axiom to be verified. It relates the state of inequality in the teacher-student relation not to the promise of an equality-to-come that will never come, but to the reality of a basic equality. In order for the ignorant one to do the exercises commanded by the master, the ignorant one must already understand what the master says. There is an equality of speaking beings that comes before the relation of inequality, one that sets the stage for inequality's very existence' (Rancière, in press). The point, in short, is not to *prove* the equality of intelligence. 'It's seeing what can be done under that supposition' (Rancière, 1991, p. 46).

Coda

A final observation. The 'explicative order' is not just an educational logic. It is at the very same time, and perhaps first and foremost, a *social* logic and the name of this logic is 'progress'. 'Progress is the pedagogical fiction built into the fiction of society as a whole. At the heart of the pedagogical fiction is the representation of inequality as a *retard* in one's development' (Rancière, 1991, p. 118). That is why progress needs public instruction as its 'secular arm' (ibid., p. 131). But as soon as one sets out on the path of progress, as soon as one sets out 'to make an equal society out of unequal men', one has only one way to go, which is 'the integral pedagogicization of society—the general infantilization of the individuals that make it up' (ibid., p. 133). 'Later', Rancière adds, 'this will be called continuing education, that is to say, the coextension of the explicatory institution with society' (ibid.). It is in relation to this that Rancière singles out Joseph Jacotot as being alone 'in recognizing the effacement of equality under progress, of emancipation under instruction' and as being the only one who 'refused all progressive and pedagogical translation of emancipatory equality' (ibid., p. 134). It is against this background that Rancière warns that emancipation cannot be mediated by social institutions (see also Biesta, 2010a). The 'heavy price to pay' for the insight that 'there are no stages to equality'—since as soon as we begin to think of equality as something that can be achieved starting from inequality we have already given up the possibility of equality—is that 'there is no social emancipation, and no emancipatory school' (Rancière, in press). The reason for this stems from the insight that '(i)f explanation is a social method, the method by which inequality gets represented and reproduced, and if the institution is the place where this representation operates, it follows that intellectual emancipation is necessarily distinct from social and institutional logic' (ibid.). Although it does therefore matter how we refer to those who are the subjects of education, it matters as a verification of the axiom of equality. It is not a strategy that can be explained and can then be implemented to make schools more progressive or emancipatory. The explicative order can, in other words, not be replaced by an emancipatory order. The circle of powerlessness can only be interrupted by starting from somewhere else, by starting from a different assumption—the assumption of equality—and see 'what can be done under that supposition' (Rancière, 1991, p. 46). The suggestion to refer to our students as speakers provides such a starting point—not a conclusion.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Birthe Lund and Paola Valera for the opportunity to develop and discuss some of the ideas that have informed the paper, and would like to thank them, Stephen Lerman and those participating in the seminar on 'The Postmodern Learner' (Denmark, November 2008) for stimulating discussions.
2. I suspect that the word 'student' travels well in countries that have been affected by Latin. This may be less so for a word like 'learner', although there is, for example, the Dutch word 'leerling' which comes close in sound and meaning. A word like the French 'élève' is more difficult to translate into English. It stems from the verb 'élever', which means to lift up and, in this regard, exemplifies a logic that can also be found in some English words. See also below.
3. Note that what is verified is not the *outcome* of the use of intelligence, as this would return the process to that of explanation, but only the *use* of intelligence, i.e. that the work of the intelligence is done with attention.
4. It is here that we can find a rationale for the French word 'élève'.
5. I do not have the space to discuss my views on the relationship between education and politics in any detail. One connection is that education and politics share an interest in what below is referred to as subjectification. Another connection is that both share an interest in the question of speech. This is not to suggest that education and politics are similar practices with similar institutional arrangements. One important difference has to do with the role of the educator and the question of educational responsibility. This paper speaks to these issues since the way in which we refer to our students at the same time has implications for how we understand the identity of the educator—or in Rancière's words, of the schoolmaster. For more on the relationship between education and politics see also Biesta, 2006 and 2010b, and Ruitenberg, 2008.
6. In English translations of Rancière's work the French word 'partage' is either translated as 'division' or as 'distribution'. 'Partage' also means 'to share', both in terms of 'to share out' and 'to share in'.

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