On the Logic of Learning and Relationality

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At the university where I work, just down the hall from my office, there is a large room where students gather. One wall of this room is glass, looking onto a hallway. On this glass wall is the room's name, "The Learning Hub." I am not fond of this room's name, and I can give three reasons why. First of all, the name of the room is not accurate. When you enter this room, you will see students engaged in all sorts of activities. They are on their smart phones. They are on their laptops. They are talking with each other about all sorts of things. Yes, perhaps some are learning. But learning is not all that is going on in this hub.

Second, I am not fond of the fact that, everywhere one looks these days, educational activities are being repackaged as "learning" activities. There is a developing body of educational theory, as typified in the work of Gert Biesta, that is critical of the unbridled "learnification" happening all over the world.[1] As Biesta notes, education is being assimilated to learning, as "education is now often described as the provision of learning opportunities or learning experiences."[2] Third, I come to my own contribution to the critique on "learnification," Namely, that there is a particular — undesirable — "logic of learning" accompanying the current preoccupation with learning.

I begin by unpacking what I call the "logic of learning." The logic of learning has three main aspects. The first, simply put, is the assumption that learning *has a logic*. This logic might be said to derive from a longstanding tradition of theorizing *how people learn*. From Plato to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to John Dewey, to Maria Montessori, to Howard Gardner, educational thinkers have been offering up various figures-of-the-child in order to make the teacher better equipped to do his or her job.[3] Current discourses on learning have not given up this idea that learning *has a logic*. Indeed, as teaching is assailed, such assailing is often done in the name of this or that figure-of-the-child, a child who, presumably, does not need a teacher in order to learn. A particular irony — that the logic of learning employs tropes that were designed for teachers — should not be lost in the current discussion. To say that learning has a logic is not to say that learning has *one* particular logic. Many educational thinkers opine differently about what the logic of learning is. But it is to say that learning is observable enough, or theorizable enough, or at least figure-izable enough, that we can talk about its logic — whatever the particular logic might be.

Another aspect of the logic of learning is best witnessed by looking to the beginnings of learnification. While it is difficult to point to the precise origins of the shift to learning, one touchstone is the widely cited article of 1995 by Robert Barr and John Tagg, published in *Change: The Magazine of Higher Education*. Entitled, "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Higher Education," this essay offers an argument as to why educators in post-secondary institutions should focus on learning rather than teaching.[4] Barr and Tagg posit a binary of learning/teaching.

Then they argue that there must be a shift from teaching to learning. In doing so, Barr and Tagg create a stereotype of teaching by assimilating teaching to *direct instruction*. Thus, while any reasonable consideration of teaching would not assume that teaching consists completely, or even primarily, of direct instruction, the "new paradigm" of learning premises its own necessity on a rather thin misrepresentation of teaching-as-instruction. The logic of learning assumes that teaching means direct instruction.

A third aspect to the logic of learning can be termed "normation." This aspect can be observed first in the various figures-of-the-child mentioned above but also can be noticed more widely. Normation refers to the tendency to talk about learning as either on or off track, either right or wrong, either successful or unsuccessful. Discourses on learning, be they school-based, clinically based, or entrepreneurial, commonly entail the normative message that learning has a certain trajectory — and deviance from this trajectory means learning does not happen as effectively as it might otherwise happen. Thus, in schools, one encounters the labels of "slow learner," or "exceptional learner," implying that the rate of learning has some "natural" speed and that any speed not commensurate with the natural one needs special attention. As another example, this time in psychological discourse, one finds entries for Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) that are clearly aimed at learners: "often avoids, dislikes, or is reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort (e.g., schoolwork or homework)."[5] There are also the ubiquitous, if costly, seminars that barrage teachers' email inboxes daily, such as this one I received recently: "Strategies to reach students in poverty." The implication of this particular seminar is that students in poverty learn differently from other students. In sum, what I am calling "the logic of learning" has at least three facets: that learning has its own logic, that teaching is primarily a matter of instruction, and that learning has a "normal" way of happening.

Within the context of this logic of learning, I would like now to address Samir Haddad's essay, "Shared Learning and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*." In this essay, Haddad's stated goal is to reconcile the educational work of Jacques Rancière with the work that Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons have done in their book, *In Defence of the School*.[6] Haddad senses a certain isolationism in Rancière's work, whereas Masschelein and Simons promote the group associations that schools facilitate. So Haddad's question is that of how to reconcile the insights of Rancière in a group setting such as the school. In my opinion, the effort to place Rancière's work in a group setting is worthwhile. It may be a difficult challenge, but educational theorizing is rarely easy. It would have been admirable had the challenge been taken up. Instead, Haddad chose to do as his title suggests, namely, to reconcile "shared learning" with *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

This brings me back to the logic of learning. If it were possible to epitomize Rancière's educational work, one way to do so would be to say that there is *never* a particular logic to universal teaching nor to what might be called universal learning. Quite the contrary, the person who undergoes universal learning — and here one might equally substitute emancipated learning — does not proceed in a way

that follows an anticipatable logic. This person proceeds rather "from proximity to proximity."[7] The person who undergoes intellectual emancipation is set on his or her own "orbit" around the truth.[8] Universal learning and intellectual emancipation, following Rancière, will necessarily proceed without method and without a particular logic. They do so because they entail only the thinnest of paradigms: the process of observation, repetition, and verification. Another way to say this is that emancipated learning proceeds by the methodology of chance. In Rancière's terms, as an emancipated learner, you will "methodically repeat the method of chance that gave you the measure of your power."[9]

Thus, there is a hitch when one desires to reconcile shared *learning* with Rancière's work. The hitch comes because Rancière drastically alters, indeed denies, that there should be a logic of learning. Searching for something *in* shared learning, while retaining a certain logic of learning, leads to something other than reconciling Rancière's work with sociality. It leads to reconciling a certain version of learning with Rancière's work, but not the emancipated, chance-riddled sort of learning that Rancière details in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

That Haddad offers a certain logic of learning is demonstrated in the two ways that he advocates shared learning. First, Haddad notes that "we have much to learn from the way that others learn." Haddad also writes, "to learn from the learning of others means also learning from their mistakes." In the first case, learning is posited as observable and thus replicable, entailing the first aspect of the logic of learning noted above: that learning has a logic. In the second case, learning is posited in a normative form, as something that can be right or wrong, conforming to the third aspect noted above. In both cases, one might say that the adventure of intellectual emancipation is stripped away because the machinery of ordered pedagogy — in this case in the form of ordered learning — is reintroduced to universal education.

If I had more time in this essay, I would very much appreciate taking up Haddad's challenge. I would like to explore relationality in the context of Rancière's book, *The Emancipated Spectator*. For the task is an admirable and difficult one. But it has not yet been attempted here for the simple reason that the logic of learning continues to dominate. To conclude, I would like to use Rancière's words, the ones cited by Haddad in his twelfth footnote: "Jacotot drew a radical distinction: Emancipation could never be a social logic." There are two ways to read this statement, and I disagree with Haddad's reading. For Haddad, this statement means that the logic of Emancipation could never be social for Jacotot. It could never be a *social* logic. On the other hand, one could read this statement as saying that even if it is social, Emancipation can never be a *logic*. The second interpretation is more in keeping with Rancière's body of work, and it does not at all imply a lack of sociality. The task is still ahead, only next time without the logic of learning.

no. 2 (2012): 35–49; Gert J. J. Biesta, "Receiving the Gift of Teaching: From 'Learning from' to 'Being taught by,' *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32, no. 5, (2013): 449–461.

2. Biesta, "Against Learning," 55.

3. Charles Bingham and Gert J. J. Biesta, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

4. Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, "From Teaching to Learning — A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 27, no. 6 (1995): 12–26.

5. American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (2013), http://dsm.psychiatryonline.org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/doi/full/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm01#BCFHAEIJ, 5.

6. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, *In Defence of the School: A Public Issue*, trans. Jack McMartin (Leuven: E-ducation, Culture and Society Publishers, 2013), https://ppw.kuleuven.be/home/english/research/ecs/les/in-defence-of-the-school/jan-masschelein-maarten-simons-in-defence-of-the.html.

7. Bingham and Biesta, *Jacques Rancière*, 4.

8. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 59.

9. Ibid., 16.