

## Training Ignorant experts?

### Taking Jacques Rancière seriously in music teacher education

**M**usic teachers are commonly viewed as *experts*. Being an expert or master is usually considered to be possible in only a narrow and specific field. However, music teaching requires a wide range of expertise, making it impossible to prepare future teachers for the variety of situations they will encounter during their careers. Even though music teachers usually concentrate on a particular area of music, be it as general music teachers in schools or instrument teachers who are often further specialised according to musical genres, the core skills that a teacher needs are not always clear. Music teachers can find themselves in situations in which they feel far from being an expert. The various musical and pedagogical challenges they face may cause them to question their professional identity as music teachers and experts. This leads to the question, could music teacher education be rethought in a way that it would better prepare future teachers for the variety of challenges they will face?

In this article, we aim to explore this question through the work of French philosopher Jacques Rancière (born 1940). In particular, we put his ideas from *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991/1987) in dialogue with the current discussion on music teacher education as presented in *Professional Knowledge in Music Teacher Education* (Georgii-Hemming, Burnard & Holgersen 2013). We focus on Rancière's ideas about the value of 'being ignorant' and the equality of intelligences to examine what it could mean for a teacher to be an ignorant expert.

### Concepts from Rancière

Naturally, upon beginning our study of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, we first thought that the term 'ignorant' was used in a clearly derogatory sense. The terms 'ignorance' or 'ignorant' are scandalous terms especially in the context of long-cherished music teaching traditions. We struggled to imagine how it could be possible to teach music without ourselves being proficient musicians, and recalled times when we questioned our professional identity as a music teacher because of a lack of certain skills. What then does Rancière mean when saying that the teacher should be ignorant?

Jacques Rancière advances a very particular understanding of the term 'ignorance'. He declares that "[a]n ignorant schoolmaster is not an ignorant person who is thrilled by playing teacher. It is a teacher who teaches—that is to say who is for another a means of knowledge—without transmitting any knowledge" (Rancière 2010, 2). Despite this understanding that Rancière does not mean that the teacher should be unskilled or unknowledgeable, his idea of a teacher not transmitting any knowledge still constitutes a radical challenge to the traditional master-apprentice setting of teaching music, which is based heavily on the idea of a 'master', as a possessor of skills and knowledge that are transmitted to someone, that is, the student, who lacks them. Again we wondered, if the teacher does not transmit any knowledge, what is s/he is doing?

The teacher's role according to Rancière is not to be a 'master explicator', meaning a superior intelligence who explains to one who does not know, but a person driving the student's will. For Rancière ignorance signifies a rupture between knowledge and the will to know. He says, "transmission of knowledge' consists in fact of two intertwined relations that are important to dissociate: a relation of will to will and a relation of

intelligence to intelligence” (Rancière 2010, 2). This idea is based on the axiomatic nature of the equality of intelligences. This does *not* mean that all intelligences are the same or that we all ‘know’ the same. It means that we start from the assumption that all intelligences are equal and that we act on the basis that the student uses her or his intelligence in an equally valid way. Thus, “The ignorant schoolmaster exercises no relation of intelligence to intelligence. He or she is only an authority, only a will that sets the ignorant person down a path, that is to say to instigate a capacity already possessed” (Rancière 2010, 2–3). According to Rancière, acting on the basis of equality entails a dissociation between intelligences, but *not* a dissociation between students and teachers, so that a master is still needed, “The students had learned without a master explicator, but not, for all that, without a master” (Rancière 2010, 12–13).

In music education, and especially instrument instruction, however, there is a long master-apprentice tradition that creates a hierarchy between the teacher and student. Holgersen and Burnard (2013) recognize that, “Music education tends to be conservative and stick to conventional ways of teaching the subject, and more often this is the case for both teacher education and teaching practices in different institutions” (Ibid., 190). Many music educators find this master-apprentice tradition dissatisfying in its failure to promote student creativity and student led approaches that would motivate and sustain the student’s will to learn.

### **Rancière meets the current discussion of music teacher education**

The book, *Professional Knowledge in Music Teacher Education* (Georgii-Hemming, Burnard & Holgersen 2013), could be seen as sharing many of Rancière’s ideas. Holgersen and Burnard (2013) recognize that “A persistent view among teachers at music conservatories has been—and to some degree still is—that the most important or even the only prerequisite for being a good music teacher is to be a good musician. The rationale of learning behind this view is that mimicry is the general pathway to learning” (p. 196). This view is in obvious opposition to Rancière. In contrast, however, throughout Georgii-Hemming, Burnard and Holgersen’s book the importance of professional knowledge creation is stressed: “As the pace of change is high, music teachers, as with all teachers, must now be helped to *create* the professional knowledge in music teacher education and teaching practice that is needed” (Holgersen & Burnard 2013, 190–1, italics original). The overarching idea is that you cannot teach or learn everything during teacher education, and it is therefore important that the continuous development of professional knowledge and self-renewal is ongoing throughout one’s career (Ibid., 189). We see this as a recognition of the inevitability of ignorance, especially when Burnard (2013) states, “We cannot assume that ideas about music teacher knowledge that apply in one setting have universal application” (Ibid., 100).

It is important to consider what kinds of knowledge a music teacher requires. In a 1987 article, educational psychologist Schulman offered seven categories of knowledge in teaching: content knowledge; general pedagogical knowledge; curriculum knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge; knowledge of learners; knowledge of educational contexts; and knowledge of educational ends; where pedagogical content knowledge is the one that distinguishes teaching from other professions (Mateiro & Westvall 2013, 159). In our field, Mateiro and Westvall (2013) state that knowing what to teach (content knowledge) and how to teach (pedagogical content knowledge) “requires musical expertise, knowledge of various methods and approaches to music education, and reflection on the pedagogical practices of professionals, as well as on their own practice as a teacher in the classroom” (Ibid., 169).

Comparing this to how Rancière conceives knowledge in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991/1987), it appears that his focus is not on what is being taught but on how it is taught. His ideas invite us to consider how we teach teachers to teach music, especially when musical knowledge includes much skill, know-how, or craftsmanship and not just intellectual knowledge. According to Rancière, “One must have the student relate what he or she does not know to what is known, to observe and compare, to recount what has been seen and to verify what has been said. If there is a refusal to do this, it is because the student does not think it possible or necessary to know any more” (Rancière 2010, 5). Similarly, many of the authors in *Professional Knowledge in Music Teacher Education* promote engaging student teachers in research and developing a teacher-as-researcher perspective (Ibid., 191). This view “shatters the stereotype of students as passive recipients of new knowledge” (Ibid., 192), and is therefore very much in line with Rancière’s opposition to the teacher as ‘master explicator’ as is the idea that, “The transfer of practical knowledge between professionals involves far more than telling or simply providing information” (Ibid., 194).

### On driving the student’s will

If, according to Rancière, the most important role of a teacher is to drive the student’s will, what could this mean for teacher education? The act of affecting a student’s will is not without ethical questions. For example, could it be considered manipulation? It is unclear exactly what Rancière means by driving another’s will, but perhaps his idea could be linked to the challenge of student motivation. Although the benefits of being a motivating teacher are widely recognized, how to actually teach student teachers to become motivating teachers is absent from the literature. In *Professional Knowledge in Music Teacher Education*, Burnard (2013) comes the closest by addressing the important role that professional knowledge plays: “Music educators can significantly influence attitudes towards music learning and learners’ motivation to learn, not only through their content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts and knowledge of educational ends, but—and equally important—through their capacity to inspire and their passionate implementation of music teacher education programmes” (Ibid., 2). Based upon our experiences in teacher training, the question of building motivation is, in fact, central. Like Rancière, we find it important to teach student teachers how to constantly ask questions and discover things unknown to them. This requires a safe environment and a teacher who is not a ‘master explicator’ but someone who facilitates the process based on the assumption of equality.

### Conclusion

So should training ignorant experts, as suggested by Jacques Rancière, be a goal of music teacher education? Considering the uncertain future professional situations of student teachers, we feel that ignorance is inevitable and something to be embraced. Music teacher education could strive to train teachers to see ‘ignorance’ as something positive that could drive them to constantly be curious about discovering what they do not yet know. This in turn could encourage them to take on the role of teacher-as-researcher throughout their career, to constantly recreate their professional knowledge and their teacher identity. This requires the teachers to have strong agency and control over their work. The risk of not embracing ignorance could be the development of teachers who are only responsible for delivering a prescribed curriculum, perhaps reducing them to ‘master explicators’. ■

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