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## **The Intimate Schoolmaster and the Ignorant Sifu:**

### **Poststructuralism, Bruce Lee and the ignorance of everyday radical pedagogy**

Paul Bowman

#### **Keywords**

Pedagogy, Rancière, poststructuralism, Bruce Lee, rhetoric

#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the rhetorical underpinning of a conference theme, ‘The Pedagogics of Unlearning’, by way of a consideration of three figures: First, ‘the ignorant schoolmaster’ as constructed by Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*; second, ‘the intimate schoolmaster’, as fantasized and feared by a diverse range of theories and theorists (but attention will specifically go to this figure as he features in a key moment of poststructuralism, namely Derrida’s *Dissemination*); and third, ‘the ignorant sifu’, as the figure which exemplifies a strong impulse in many modern movements in approaches to martial arts, self-defence and combat training. These three figures are constructed as Joseph Jacotot, Plato/Socrates and Bruce Lee. The paper does this in order to explore an undecidability at the heart of the binary ignorance/knowledge, and in order to point out that ignorance has always been a key (even if unacknowledged) premise of the dominant textual and discourse approaches of poststructuralism, as well as to offer some reasons why we might try to unlearn some of our dominant understandings of or assumptions about the political and cultural importance of pedagogy.

## Bio

Paul Bowman is Professor of Cultural Studies at Cardiff University. His most recent books are *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* (2015) and *Mythologies of Martial Arts* (2016).

## Introduction: Unlearning the Crisis

Invited to a conference with the title of ‘The Pedagogics of Unlearning’,<sup>1</sup> a first challenge was to work out how to make sense of and respond to the rhetorical contortions of this title itself. Why this phrasing? What conceptualisation did it imply? What might the conference organisers possibly have been thinking in coming up with such a phrase, and setting it up as the very organising ‘idea’ – or rhetorico-conceptual challenge for speakers to tackle.

‘The Pedagogics of Unlearning’ is definitely an unusual and awkward phrase, for what may quite possibly have an unusual, awkward, or even impossible formulation. To make my own sense of it I had to translate it, expand it, and unpack it, in my own way. Inevitably, there are other ways and other translations. But to me, the phrase or formulation ‘the pedagogics of unlearning’ seemed to be asking to be translated as something like: ‘this conference seeks to be about how to emancipate ourselves from everything we ever thought we knew about the logics of teaching and learning’. Or, to unpack this more fully: ‘this conference seeks to be about (a *good thing* called) how to emancipate ourselves from (a deluded condition vis-à-vis) everything we ever thought we knew about (an implicitly *bad* or at least suspect thing or group of things,

at least to the extent that we need to unlearn it or them, called) the logics of teaching and learning’.

But did this mean that the conference theme was therefore about establishing how to be great teachers and how to facilitate the best learning? I didn’t think so. Moreover, there are already plenty of conferences and publications about that sort of thing; and they certainly aren’t organised by such an awkward and unusual rhetorical formulation as ‘the pedagogics of unlearning’. In fact, I imagined that the phrase ‘the pedagogics of unlearning’ was chosen specifically to signal a distance and difference from conferences concerned with ‘teaching and learning’. In other words, it looked to me like there was a deliberate inversion and twisting involved in this rhetoric and its challenge to thought, which meant that even if we are *also* interested in ditching the worst and keeping the best when it comes to pedagogy, we were being challenged to maintain this difference in orientation *as* a difference in orientation.

So, what do I think this rhetoric or formulation is asking us to do? I think that it is asking us to interrogate all of the key nodal points and rhetorical, conceptual and ideological coordinates that implicitly and explicitly organise the constellations of thinking, theorising and discoursing on pedagogy – whether dominant or conventional, folk or professional. Why might this be important? Is it ‘merely rhetorical’, ‘philosophical’, or ‘entirely academic’? Maybe, yes; but also, such interrogation could come to challenge, reorientate or reconfigure pragmatics and pedagogics in any number of ways. Which could be good.

Yet wouldn't this simply be another way of saying that the conference sought to be about how to 'unlearn' the worst in teaching and learning practices? And if so, why this awkward tarrying with the negative? After all, to cut to the chase: doesn't *everyone* want to come up with the *best* pedagogics, the best forms and contents of teaching? I think so. And for any number of reasons. However, when it comes to a consideration of formal education – in schools, colleges and universities – this matter seems incredibly overburdened by a very familiar argument, which runs something like this: *matters of teaching and learning matter because education matters, and education matters because its forms and contents (but more importantly its values) help to produce certain kinds of people, certain sorts of subject, and hence it matters for the very fabric of society.*

As many have argued: contemporary governments more and more regard the school as both the focus and the method, the target and the paradigm, the concept and the field for implementing not just educational policy, but policies of all kinds. It is as if educational institutions are there purely to be tinkered with – as if they are machines to be manipulated, in order to produce a regularised, predictable product (*subjects*), like sausages from a sausage factory. In other words, education is effectively regarded as an ideological state apparatus. And, today, you don't have to be an Althusserian to think this. Indeed, the belief that educational institutions are incalculably important, politically and ideologically, is something that *everyone* – from the most conservative to the most radical of thinkers – seems to agree on. This is why it so easily seems so logical to want to get rid of (or to unlearn) the bad and to institute the good. What other reason for such a conference could there be?

I can think of at least one other possibility. Maybe we were being enjoined to unlearn this very argument; to disarticulate the presumed homogenising connection between pedagogy and politics; perhaps in order to ‘save’ what Derrida called the ‘hospitality’ or the promise of the ‘openness’ of the university in the face of generalized ends-and-outcomes-orientated managerialism. If we could *uncouple* the connections that have turned all educational contexts into little more than the crucibles, laboratories and fields of educational policies, then this could in itself be radical and transformative. Such would seem to be part of the rationale for the orientation of the conference.

Certainly, state education seems overburdened with all kinds of policy baggage. And, on the one hand, this seems like a bad thing. But, on the other hand, to reiterate, as I have already proposed, I think that, by and large, we *all* tend to assume that education is always and already *inevitably and necessarily* a key battleground of and for hegemonies of all kinds. Certainly, we all have certain axes to grind and certain horses that we back. Hence we do or we don’t want creationism or evolution to be taught in schools, and we do or we don’t want multiculturalism championed or denounced, and we do or we don’t want the learning of facts by rote, and we do or we don’t want the encouragement of free critical thinking, and so on.

So far so paternalistic. However, the real problem for academics seems to arrive when all of this arrives or returns to knock on our own door – specifically, the departmental doors of our own university – when we perceive the presence and force of hegemonies working (or trying to work) *on us*, and we feel the forces of dictates other than those of our own axes and our own horses, it strikes us as outrageous, and we come over all Kantian: the university should be free, we say; and we denounce either

the politicization or the depoliticization of the university; and we want to change it, or halt it; even though, in a sense, we are merely experiencing what we say we already knew: the fact that educational institutions are key locations in any kind of hegemonic bloc or formation. It's only that we feel *we* should be exempt – because we are the philosophers, not the poor, or the uneducated, or the children. Or, if we *can't* be exempt, if we have to be included, we dislike this because this is *not* the hegemony we would prefer. If it were the hegemony we wanted, then we'd think we were free. But it's not, and we don't like it, so we say it's a 'crisis' and we want to police the crisis, or ward off the crisis, perhaps through the magical alchemy of polemic and critique.

### **Unlearning Emancipation**

But maybe things have already gone too far. Or maybe it's just that I have already gone too far. Maybe my translation of the title 'the pedagogics of unlearning' need only be rephrased as a question; perhaps like this: how do we rid ourselves of the instituted delusions of what Jacques Rancière once called the 'explicative order', and rid ourselves of all of the deleterious consequences of various kinds of pedagogy, from the stultification of individual souls to the generalised maintenance of inequality?<sup>2</sup>

This is a Rancièrian question, of course; or one that I have forged using some of the terms that Rancière uses in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Furthermore, my translation-interpretation of the conference title and general field of problematics to be engaged is

clearly Rancièrian too. This is because I recognised in the awkward phrase of the title the presence and effects of a reading of Rancière's book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Plus, I found out that Professor Rancière was to be our closing keynote. So I put two and two together, ignored all the other prompts in what the organisers called the conference 'irrationale'<sup>3</sup> (for instance, the conference rationale, or 'irrationale', also enjoined us to think about 'the pedagogics of unlearning' in Lacanian or Derridean terms), and came up with my present translation-interpretation.

So: regarding my Rancièrian question about whether we can rid ourselves of stultification and inequality by education; the short (Rancièrian) answer would be no: no we can't get rid of these things; we can't rid ourselves of stultifying pedagogy, and we certainly can't eradicate inequality. Not *en masse*. Not institutionally. Not through policy. As Rancière writes at the start of *Education, Truth, Emancipation*:

there is no social emancipation, and no emancipatory school. Jacotot [the radical educational innovator that is the focus of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*] strictly distinguishes the method of emancipation, which is the method of individuals, from the social method of explanation. Society is a mechanism ruled by the momentum of unequal bodies, by the game of compensated inequalities. Equality can only be introduced therein at the price of inequality, by transforming equality into its opposite. Only individuals can be emancipated. And all emancipation can promise is to teach people to be equal in a society ruled by inequality and by the institutions that 'explain' such inequality. (Rancière 2010: 9)



Only *individuals* can be emancipated, argues Rancière. But you can't *institute* this. You can't *bottle* it. You can't *standardize* it. It demands both an *intimacy* (that no social planning or policy or instituting can guarantee) and – if schooling is needed – you need an *ignorant schoolmaster*. What is an ignorant schoolmaster? Rancière is not coy about this:

The ignorant schoolmaster – that is to say one who is ignorant of inequality – addresses him or herself to the ignorant person not from the point of view of the person's ignorance but of the person's knowledge; the one who is supposedly ignorant in fact already understands innumerable things. (Rancière 2010: 5)

In other words: Rancière constructs an *intimate* rhetorico-pedagogical relation, and an *egalitarian* one. Emancipatory pedagogy involves a mode of rhetorical address that proceeds on the basis of an assumed equality. It says: if you don't know, work it out; you know how to work things out: so, try. The pedagogue's job is to address the other in such a way as to say, come on, work it out, I want you to solve this riddle; and I intend to verify that you have done it. Famously, Rancière argues that the emancipatory relation still involves *will dominating will*. We do not all become *laissez-faire* hippies. But, crucially, the pedagogical relation is not to be perceived as one of knowledge versus ignorance or intelligence versus stupidity. These latter interpretations of the pedagogical scene are, in Rancière's terms, *stultifying*. As he writes:

Jacotot did not see what kind of liberty for the people could result from the dutifulness of their instructors. On the contrary, he sensed in all this a new form of stultification. Whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies. And whoever

emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing maybe. He will know he can learn because the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of the human mind, and a man can always understand another man's words. (Rancière 1991: 18)

Now, it deserves to be mentioned: this is not just any old argument. Rather, this argument has a central place in Rancière's work. This means that considerations of rhetoric and address have a central place in Rancière's work. That 'a man can always understand another man's words' is arguably a premise central to all of Rancière's political thinking (Rancière 1999). And nowadays, people ('Rancièreans') feel confident with this argument. But, rather than dwelling on this point, I would like to note that in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière immediately continues this paragraph with a quick anecdote:

Jacotot's printer had a retarded son. They had despaired of making something of him. Jacotot taught him Hebrew. Later the child became an excellent lithographer. It goes without saying that he never used the Hebrew for anything – except to know what more gifted and learned minds never knew: *it wasn't Hebrew*. (Rancière 1991: 18)

This is a very provocative passage. It is also problematic. It is in a way central to what I want to think about in this paper. However, before I move on to that, I have to add, first, that in order to think about all of this in terms of 'the pedagogics of unlearning' we need to remember two things about *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

## Knowledge of Ignorance

The first is that Joseph Jacotot was *already* a popular teacher, before he ‘discovered’ *anything* about pedagogy. The second is that what he discovered or realised is that you can teach people stuff that you don’t know; and/or, in reverse, that you can learn without being taught. So, when Jacotot taught the son Hebrew, what most likely happened was that he told the son to go off and learn Hebrew. Or maybe he even supervised him – in the sense of making sure *that* he was studying, rather than checking *what* he was doing while he was studying. Because, remember, Jacotot wasn’t teaching in the sense of imparting or communicating knowledge. He was merely encouraging, inspiring, or insisting that study take place, without policing the method or the result.

Of course, the fact that the boy studied Hebrew but never really learned Hebrew yet nevertheless learned *something*, so much so that it may have helped him to go on to become a lithographer (if there is actually a connection here), is deeply *interesting*. Artists and educators of all sorts have been inspired by this kind of story. It seems extremely up-beat and enabling. But something bothers me about it. It is the fact that Rancière allows the son to *know* that he does not know Hebrew. What bothers me about this is that Rancière thereby maintains a stability in the relation between knowledge and ignorance. The son *knows* that what he has learned when studying Hebrew was not Hebrew.<sup>4</sup>

This allows Rancière to convey very clearly – as if with a wink and a wry smile – his polemical lesson about pedagogy. *Study stuff; you'll learn stuff; it might not be what it says on the tin, but it's still stuff, and it'll do you good.* Yet, in both its implicit affirmation of the production of 'other knowledge' and of the emancipation of the son through his learning of the fact that he can learn, as an equal, the story eliminates an important element of undecidability. It keeps everything in its proper place: ignorance and knowledge. No one in the story knows Hebrew, but the son gains an emancipating sense of self-worth and distinction from the knowledge that *other people don't know what he does know which is that he doesn't know Hebrew.*

It is this dimension of a clear distinction – or indeed partition or distribution – between knowledge and ignorance that interests me. This is because there are myriad contexts everywhere in the world, in life, in different practices and discourses, where the disambiguation of ignorance and knowledge in this way seems impossible. Moreover, the interminable undecidability of ignorance and learning in most places seems hugely functional. This is what every theory of 'discourse' is enabled by. It is certainly what subtends postmodern/Lyotardian theories of the 'legitimation crisis in knowledge'. It is, in other words, something of a fact of life.

### **Segue: Daydream Believing**

In this light and from this position, in what follows I want to consider a few more contexts which might help us to interrogate the terms of our most common discourses of and on pedagogy and its rhetorics. However, I won't take any of my examples from

the realms of either the school or the university. This is because I think to do so would allow us to indulge in our easiest poststructuralist fantasies about the ideal-typical pedagogical scene.

In the tradition of poststructuralism that was in a sense instituted and organised by the approaches of Derrida and de Man, a certain kind of bias inevitably emerged. To my mind, this enabled a certain type of poststructuralist fantasy to emerge, about the characteristics the ideal-typical pedagogical scene. This scene is neither ‘arboreal’ nor ‘rhizomatic’ nor virtual nor mediated; rather, it is basically a fantasy about a really great Literature seminar. We see this fantasy emerging time and again in poststructuralist discussions of teaching and learning. However, I want to stay as far away from this logocentric classroom image as possible.

One reason is this: to me, too much poststructuralist thinking and writing about learning still seems based on at best an overvaluation of and at worst a ‘repressive hypothesis’ involving modernist literature. As Rey Chow observes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, even in the early work of Foucault – and I am proposing that this continues throughout a great deal of literary deconstruction – the attitude is that the evil instrumental rationality of the world has really got it in for the heroic minority still invested in the saintly endeavour of reading really difficult literature. But what happens if we broaden our frames – or even invert and displace them – in order to think about pedagogical scenes and relations that are rather far removed from the school or university classroom?

If we think about pedagogical scenes and relations that differ from the ‘wordy’, ‘logophiliac’ or indeed ‘logocentric’ preoccupations that tend to be preferred by poststructuralist thinking about pedagogy, it would seem reasonable (surely, even overdetermined) to include practices of the body.

### **Intimate Lee**

I have argued before that an excellent case to consider when thinking about teaching and learning in terms of Rancière’s arguments about emancipation and stultification is none other than Bruce Lee. As I first argued in a piece I wrote for Michael O’Rourke and Sam Chambers in their *Borderlands* journal issue ‘Jacques Rancière on the Shores of Queer Theory’, Bruce Lee actually proceeded in a very Jacototian manner (Bowman 2009). Moreover, and more importantly, he was not alone. But he also blazed a trail. And this seems important: to borrow and mangle a phrase: this was a train that others followed – without following.

Bruce Lee was very much an autodidact; he was iconoclastic, hands-on, inventive, verificationist. He was also the author of a massively influential magazine article called ‘Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate’ (Lee 1971), which argued (in effect) that most martial arts pedagogy insists on, produces and intensifies *deference*, *reverence*, and *conformity*, via the institution of hierarchies, and hence feelings of *inferiority* and *inequality*. Martial arts pedagogy produces robots, he argued. It stultifies. And it does so because true insight into what he called the truth and reality of combat cannot and should not be institutionalised in the ways it has been. Think of classes of white pyjama-clad students standing in rows performing rote drills of kicks,

punches and blocks upon the shouted commands of the instructor. As a counter-image to this, Lee fantasized the figure of the founder of a martial art. He characterises this figure as fluid and dynamic, as able to move freely and to honestly express himself. The problem comes, he argues, when this figure's followers try to capture the essence of the genius and insight of the master; or indeed, when he or anyone else tries to formalise it. It is at this point of formalization that everything goes wrong. The genius is lost in the very effort to preserve it. This is because the genius of any martial art could be said to lie not in the accumulation of its techniques but rather in the ability to actualise its meta-principle in a potentially infinite array of singular circumstances. In other words, to go beyond Bruce Lee's thought, for a moment: it is because there is no master.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Lee clearly identified with precisely such a founder figure. This would certainly explain his ambivalence *vis-à-vis* what he himself had been teaching to his students during the final years of his tragically short life. For a long time he had merely taught what he called 'Jun Fan Kung Fu' – and, given that Jun Fan was one version of his name, this did not signify a style as such. It just meant 'Bruce Lee's kung fu school'. However, in 1968 Lee became enamoured of the combination of the Cantonese terms for 'stop' or 'interrupt' (which in Cantonese is *jeet*) and 'hit' (which in Cantonese is *kune*). This is because he believed that the highest aspiration in all martial arts is to block and strike simultaneously – to interrupt another's attack (*jeet*) and to hit (*kune*) simultaneously. So from 1968 Lee termed his 'style' *Jeet Kune Do*. As a name, Jeet Kune Do referred solely to his preferred highest principle and aspiration, or his meta-principle. However, by the time he was becoming really famous, from 1971 onwards, Lee allegedly regretted naming his approach at all,

because a name implies an entity, a fixed identity, with a stable form and content, and Lee wanted what he did and what his friends, training partners and students did, to keep evolving. Shortly before his untimely death in 1973, he even told his senior students to stop teaching completely. The jury is still out about exactly why he did this.

The most ungenerous interpretations suggest that Lee did this because he was worried that because of his growing celebrity his students would be exposed as inferior martial artists, something that would inevitably reflect badly on him. Other interpretations refer to the fact that because his film career had taken off he knew he couldn't devote enough time to this part of his life, so he sensibly shut up shop. But another equally viable interpretation relates to his thinking about pedagogy. It is his own senior student, Dan Inosanto, who now regularly reiterates this point: jeet kune do, says Inosanto, is something that can be taught, and learnt, but that cannot be formalised, institutionalised or standardised. It demands an *intimacy* that no institution can guarantee. You either get it, or you don't. Consequently, Inosanto himself claims that whilst he teaches a range of martial arts classes to anyone, only select individuals are invited or accepted into his Jeet Kune Do classes.<sup>6</sup> In this, Inosanto continues partially in Lee's footsteps, adopting a kind of synthesis of Lee's approach: for, after initially aspiring to set up a major franchise of martial arts clubs in the USA, Lee ultimately came to conclude that teaching should be small-scale and intimate.

But none of this is radical. Indeed, it bears family resemblances to one of the most traditional of institutions in Chinese martial arts pedagogy: the tradition of the 'indoor student'. This is a student selected by the master as the one most apt to carry the torch



forward, and who is therefore given considerably more (and considerably more private and intimate) attention. We might evaluate this tradition in any number of ways. In Deleuzian terms, it is arboreal. In Derridean terms, it is inseminal rather than disseminatory. In Rancièrian terms, it may be either stultifying or emancipatory. However, what is clear is that it demands intimacy.

### **Ambivalent Intimacy**

There is an ambivalence in poststructuralism about intimacy. On the one hand, as we see in Derrida's reading of Socrates/Plato, pedagogical intimacy can be phonocentric, metaphysical, dominating, constraining, and so on (Derrida 1981). But on the other hand, the intimacy implied in the poststructuralist fantasy scenario of a seminar group of close reading and the close discussion of a difficult modernist literary text is sometimes put on a pedestal and raised to the status of being just about the only kind of authentic revelatory event – the only one that the first generation of poststructuralists seemed to know about, anyway. Might this fetish or fantasy be something we should unlearn?

In any case, there does not seem to be any of this ambivalence about intimacy in Rancièrian work. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* we have illiterate fathers coaching their children in learning to read by making them connect the sound of the words of The Lord's Prayer with the marks on the page, and whole classrooms of students learning all manner of sciences, languages, jurisprudence and legal argumentation without any formal content being transmitted from the teacher or anyone else to them.

All that seems required for ignorant schoolmastery is the alchemy of egalitarian address and hierarchy of wills.<sup>7</sup>

But this type of relation is precisely the one that poststructuralism most seems to worry about. However, poststructuralism seems very comfortable with some other types of intimacy. For instance, it demands extreme intimacy with the textual supplement (specifically with the *book*). Yet it is much less comfortable with the idea of intimacy with the pedagogue. Rancière or Jacotot repeats this in a way. Rancière's Jacotot demands an intimacy with the text (or other object, riddle or problem); but he also seems to require a definite *distance* between teacher and student (or between master and autodidact). The ignorant schoolmaster addresses the student as an equal but also exerts his or her will. There is a definite personal interaction, from instruction to encouragement to verification. But there is an absolute separation between the commander and the commanded. The teaching and the learning both take place autodidactically, without the transfer of signified content from one mind to another.

### **Teaching without Teaching**

There is a great deal of importance in Rancière's treatment of Jacotot's approach. However, if it actually seems *radical* to anyone, I suspect that this is primarily because they haven't been paying attention to everything outside the text. For, once pointed out, we can see precisely such relations *everywhere*. Just think of the sports coach, the drill sergeant, the sparring partner, the parent or grandparent, or indeed the younger sibling, or one's own students. Each of these in their own way merely demands that the student learn – or, indeed, as in the case of the grandparent, uncle,

aunt, or younger sibling, merely marvel out loud about this or that achievement of the child. As a range of studies have shown, ‘avuncular encouragement’, or merely expressing how impressive a child’s abilities seem to be, can be all that is required for children to undertake major feats of study and knowledge or skill acquisition (Stamp 2012).

Unlike the martial arts sifu or sensei or master, or indeed the university professor, the sports coach does not necessarily embody or equal the highest level of skill in the activity. The sports coach is someone who drives the student on, with carrot or whip, with challenges or praise, with advice and criticism, and so on. But their charge does not necessarily *learn* anything from them. Similarly, the drill sergeant, for Freud, merely makes the soldiers hate him by being a bastard to them, until they bond together through their shared hatred and then eventually love him as the person who made them what they are. A good sparring partner will simply present you with problems to be solved: their fist will *keep hitting* you, their foot will *keep kicking* you, or you will keep ending up on the floor being choked out unless *you* work out how to solve these problems. And as certain sociologists have shown, the clucking and cooing of the performance of amazement and pride carried out by older relatives can drive children on to greater and greater achievements of self-learning. Doubtless even the Nike slogan ‘just do it’ has played on a loop in countless people’s heads as they force themselves to learn how to go further or faster or better. Similarly, I know for certain that the words and movement-images of Bruce Lee and other cinematic martial artists, from Jackie Chan to Jason Bourne, play out in montage behind the eyes of countless students and teachers of martial arts. One of my sparring partners used to quite audibly make film sound effects noises while sparring.

The sociologist Loïc Wacquant, who spent three years immersed in the world of boxing in the Chicago ghetto actually depicts the boxing gym as a *habitus-production-and-maintenance-machine* in which everyone and everything is a teacher: the professional boxers are to be emulated; the novices serve as reminders and yardsticks of development; and when the head coach shouts commands or reprimands at *anyone* in the gym, like ‘what are you doing over there?’ or ‘keep your hands up!’, *everyone* in the gym responds, because even if not directed at them personally, such words are of course universal injunctions in the gym, and therefore they are directed at them personally.

We could go on, and come up with different typologies and taxonomies of pedagogical relations and scenes, ignorant schoolmasters and stultifying pedagogues, in different realms and registers. But there’s no need to do that. My point is merely that Jacotot’s ‘universal learning’ is universal because, well, it is at least *very widespread*. It is the artifice of the inegalitarian institution that is the anomaly to be questioned. And, again, neither Jacotot nor Rancière are unique here. Bruce Lee did precisely this in the field of martial arts, as have many others since, and (surely) before.

### **Learning without Learning**

Bruce Lee spawned a movement in martial arts, whose imperatives boil down to an anti-institutionalism, on the one hand, and an intimate experimental and verificationist ethos, on the other. In other words – in its most radical versions – the Bruce Lee

message can even be interpreted as: *don't join a school or club; work it out for yourself* (Miller 2000). This is what Bruce Lee did: he walked away from – actively renounced – martial arts styles. By the late 1960s he was saying that he no longer saw himself as practicing Chinese kung fu at all (Tom 2005).

But in his renunciation of styles and institutions lies the very problem of Bruce Lee. He never completed the syllabus of the martial art he studied in Hong Kong through his teens (*wing chun*). He went to America when he was 18 and soon started teaching. As a young hotshot he made a name for himself; and in a context saturated by militaristically-trained and sports-focused Japanese and Korean martial arts, Lee's Chinese kung fu performances stood out as something else. It was in the US context, saturated by katas and points-based competition, that Lee developed his belief that martial arts seemed to be in a sorry state: Currently, the martial arts are ineffective, he said. They are formal, rule bound, artificial. They are full of strictures, a 'fancy mess', a 'classical mess', 'organised despair'. Stultifying (Lee 1971). And so he began to innovate. He maintained the Wing Chun centreline; he added Korean taekwondo kicks; he adopted the western fencing stance; he emulated the techniques used by the best boxers with the most powerful jabs; he began learning the grappling, in-fighting and ground fighting of Japanese jujitsu; he explored the weapons styles of the Philippines. And so on.

But was this done in ignorance or knowledgeably? Can you really dip into a martial art – one whose practitioners insist it takes years to master – and pull out bits and pieces? Are you really able to *evaluate* them? Are you even able to *perceive* them? Certainly, this kind of thing is nowadays easily sent up, as a joke. In the online comedy

mockumentary series ‘Enter the Dojo’, Master Ken has devised his own martial art, called *Ameri-do-te*, whose motto is ‘the best of all, the worst of none’.

The question that is endlessly asked about Bruce Lee is: was his new hybrid form a real authentic improvement? Or was it that he could only have had the arrogance to think that *any* martial art needed improving because he had not actually finished the syllabus in *any* martial art (Smith 1999)? There are stories of Bruce Lee returning to see his teachers and classmates in Hong Kong after he had been training away from them in the US, believing he was progressing on his own. In these stories, we hear that Lee demonstrated how much he had improved. His former teachers and peers, however, believed that he had not improved at all! Indeed, to their mind, how *could* he improve? He hadn’t finished learning the syllabus, and so didn’t know what he was missing.

Accordingly, in this discourse about Bruce Lee, we see (or I see – because I have been trained to see) a version of the kind of disagreement Rancière had with Althusser – which is a version of the disagreement Rancière had with Bourdieu. In this rendition, Althusser would be in the position of the old masters. Bruce Lee would be the revolutionary student, rejecting the institution and instituting a new one. The conundrum is: do you have to go through the ranks of the institution before you can know enough to legitimately disagree with the institution or to be in a position to contest it legitimately? Is this logical, reasonable and necessary, or is it an inegalitarian, hierarchical, and possibly even stultifying position? Rancière claims that people like Althusser and Bourdieu implicitly or explicitly held the former position. He himself seems instead to advocate the latter.

In the end, our own decisions about this matter little, because this kind of thing happens all the time in the world, and perhaps nowhere more than in and around martial arts institutions. Schools, associations and styles are instituted, flourish, fragment and collapse or reform. Agreeing or disagreeing with it is like agreeing or disagreeing with the weather. There are heresies and there are factions. There are paradigm shifts and revolutions. There are mutations and transformations; there are translators and traitors. There is also the growing perception that all styles and systems are hybrids and bastards, each typically claiming a pure lineage, a completeness, a plenitude and unitarity that is actually only pure in that it is purely ideological. Consequently, unlike Jacotot's printer's son, we are rarely, if ever, in a position to know with certainty whether our Hebrew is or is not really Hebrew. *Your kung fu is not real kung fu; your tai chi is hippy tai chi, my tai chi is real martial tai chi; yours is a bastardized form, mine is the original and best.* And so on.

Of course, it is easy now to say that we know that the idea of the original, like the idea of the authentic, is a red herring. So perhaps we can adjudicate in terms of better and worse. And this is the time-honoured question of martial arts: which martial art is best? Which martial art works best? Which style would win? Whether or not Bruce Lee really knew the ins and outs of all the other martial arts, was his own construction objectively better or worse than others? Surely *this* can be decided. You'd think. Unfortunately, deciding this is like deciding which is the best move in rock-paper-scissors / scissors-paper-stone. Style against style is only ever person against person in context after context. In other words, interminably undecidable.

Which is perhaps why Bruce Lee never really engaged in polemics against specific martial arts styles. His problem was with the very idea of style, and specifically with the way styles were taught. Styles stultify, he argued. True learning is not about accumulation but about reduction. You have to get to the essence. Hence, he proposed, his approach (*jeet kune do*), could be taught and could be learned, but could not really be institutionalised. It could not be formalised. It demanded an ethos and an intimacy. It was less about formal content and much more about attitude. Teaching and learning should be experimental, alive, moving, hands on, verificationist, one-on-one. In learning jeet kune do, Lee argued, one is in a sense only *relearning* – retooling, reorienting, reprogramming, rewiring, rewriting – one’s own body. Learning how to ‘honestly express yourself’ is the phrase Lee would often use.

This started in the 1960s. Bruce Lee became world famous in the 1970s. He either initiated or was at least at the forefront of a massive Jacototian revolution in martial arts pedagogy that accelerated from that point on in the West: anti-institutional, inventive, verificationist, intimate, one-on-one, or one-on-two, or one-on-three, and so on. A lot of this inventiveness has proceeded in more or less complete ignorance of classical or formal martial arts disciplines. This anti-disciplinarity has of course produced new disciplines: MMA or mixed martial arts was – as its name attests – never meant to be one thing. But over time it has become so (kicking, punching, grappling, ground), with recognisable features and forms.

Whence the paradox: the rejection of discipline is not freedom from discipline. All martial arts revolutions, all martial arts paradigms, all martial arts learning, involve retraining one’s body, or bodily propensities. This can *only* happen both through and



to the extent that what emerges is a *discipline*. Without the institution of discipline – inherited or invented – you get nothing. No change, no improvement, no event. The discipline can be adopted (like when you join a club); or it can be invented (like when you devise your own style, techniques or training regimen). It will always be implicitly or explicitly social, or invented from socially circulating materials, discourses, ideas and principles.

Most revolutions in martial arts paradigms and institutions that I know have involved the rejection of one discipline and the reciprocal construction of another. To stick with Bruce Lee: the legend has it that he had a major rethink after ending one challenge match completely exhausted and dejected because he had not won the fight much more quickly and efficiently. Thus, the legend continues, he rejected a lot of the training and techniques specific to the style of kung fu he had hitherto practiced, and added weight-training, running and other stamina training, boxing style training, and a whole range of pad work and bag work, as well as attention to diet. Some say he also took performance enhancing drugs.

However, much of the logic and structure of the wing chun ‘nucleus’ remained active within his new creation. As Derrida put it, an institution is not just the four walls which surround us; it is the very structure of our thought. And Bruce Lee’s thinking about combat can be said to have remained hegemonized by the structure of wing chun’s implicit theory of efficiency in combat.

### **Unlearning Discipline**

Which raises an interesting question: Can discipline be unlearned? In an obvious sense, yes, of course it can. Lack of practice or improper practice means getting out of practice, getting sloppy, drifting away from the proper, forgetting, getting it wrong. This is as true of spending time away from training as it is for spending time away from academia as it is for not practicing your foreign language or even not practicing drinking your beer. And so on. Indeed, if we follow certain of the implications in Derrida's argument about the inevitability of dissemination, then the question might perhaps be reposed as one of whether it is ever possible to halt the drift and warps and discursive wending *away* from discipline. As Adam Frank argues in his ethnographic and genealogical study of taijiquan in Shanghai, one need only have a quick read of the so-called taiji 'classics' to realise that the art these 19<sup>th</sup> century texts are discussing is *very* different – very different *indeed* – from anything seen in the parks of Shanghai today. This is because the styles have drifted, bifurcated, intermingled, been subject to fashions, fads, government policies, standardizations, the modernisation movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Maoism, and so on and so forth; such that any practitioner of any form of taijiquan today is literally embodying decades upon decades of writings and rewritings that they cannot but be largely ignorant of. The embodied practice is a material residue of historical layers and all kinds of intervention that are in effect the unconscious of the activity.

On an related tangent, Frank also mentions the problem of the vacuum left in Shanghai's parks after the state crackdown on Falun Gong practice in the 1990s. He notes that in order to fill the spaces where Falun Gong practitioners had previously been, the government actually bussed in hundreds upon hundreds – even thousands – of practitioners of a new 'ancient' art, called *Mulanquan*. Now, mulanquan is passed

off as ancient, but its first appearance in public was in the wake of both the crackdown on Falun Gong and the global success of the Disney animation, *Mulan*. Needless to say, surely most of the now myriad practitioners of this sanitised and state approved form are ignorant of its peculiar emergence or institution. It is only thanks to Adam Frank's publication of knowledge gained on his intimate ethnographic research that I have learned this myself. So can I even be sure that I know it? – This may be a version of a Lyotardian 'postmodern legitimation crisis in knowledge', but it also sums up a problem for anyone who practices what they may want to believe to be an ancient and timeless Chinese or Japanese art: is this the real thing? Is my Hebrew *really* Hebrew? Do I really know Hebrew? Do I really know taiji? Is what I know *really* taiji?

Interestingly, most practitioners of Asian martial arts – Eastern *and* Western practitioners – have not the faintest idea about or interest in the actual history of the art they practice. They may believe all kinds of things about a lineage stretching back to Bodhidharma or Zhang Sanfeng or the Shaolin Temple. But most martial arts are *not allowed* to have a history, in the sense of change or development. And this is not necessarily either a problem of orientalism or self-orientalisation. Rather, it is a matter of what Derrida called *teleiopoeisis*: the crucially important political process of evoking the ancient and unchanging as a proof of the present.

Nevertheless, history moves. Discourses drift. Stabilisations disseminate. Fashions jolt. There is no pure repetition in embodied or kinetic or any other kind of mimesis. There is reiteration, which equals the introduction of alterity. This goes on without

our noticing. If we noticed it, we would try to halt it. Because our aim is learning, not unlearning.

But, if it were: *could* discipline be consciously unlearned, *deliberately* rejected, and with or without a teacher? Can we unlearn the habits of our own lifetime? Can you teach an old dog new tricks? I would propose that learning something new – something truly different – is often likely to involve a reciprocal unlearning. To stay with the example of taiji: I spent over a decade learning tai chi, after having studied several other martial arts at different times for different lengths of time. The discipline of tai chi demands more or less exactly the *opposite* of everything I'd ever learned to do before. Learning tai chi involved *unlearning* so many accumulated habits: resistance, force against force, using strength, separation, speed. And I would have to say that this kind of thing could not have been learned by me without a teacher. However, the basic teaching was mimetic. (Hands here, feet here. Watch. Copy.) The more advanced teaching was necessarily tactile and hands on. Error was *shown*, in terms of what happened to my body (pain, being pinned in an arm lock, or head lock, or throw). Correctness *revealed itself* (in terms of not getting trapped or thrown, or in terms of trapping, locking or throwing the other). The teacher's words were limited to commands, corrections: relax your shoulder; regain your posture; turn from the waist; yield; push.

Unfortunately, this kind of bodily knowledge is all too easily unlearned. It requires such a high degree of proprioceptive sensitivity and control that if you don't use it, you lose it. You can remember it intellectually; you can discuss it in words; but your body loses the ability to know it and do it.

So anthropologists and sociologists speak of bodily knowledge, embodied knowledge, the intelligence of the body. But I don't think they speak of bodily stupidity or the stupidity of the body. Ignorance, perhaps: bodies can be ignorant. Bodies can not-know, can be unaware; or indeed can ignore. But you are unlikely to hear anyone say (other than in jest) 'my body is too stupid to do push-hands', or 'my body is too stupid to do a jumping spinning back kick'. And you are unlikely to think you are more *intelligent* than your training partners if you beat them in any kind of sparring. You are merely likely to have trained harder, longer, or better. Everyone is equal. Anyone can knock anyone else out. One meaning of 'kung fu' is simply the disciplined, sustained, skilled investment of time and effort. Every martial arts teacher knows that the distance between teacher and student can close fast, sometimes in an instant. Indeed, arguably one of the basic reasons to teach students is to bring them up to a level where they can push you, to make you keep up your own discipline.

### **Conclusion: The Pedagogics of Unlearning**

In conclusion: Disciplines are invented traditions. The knowledge that disciplines produce is not only disciplinary knowledge but also and perhaps fundamentally knowledge of the discipline. This is as true for academic disciplines as it is for martial disciplines. All have their 'reality tests' and modes and manners of verification and self-verification or validation and self-validation. And very often it is possible for even contiguous work in contiguous disciplines to develop in complete ignorance of the work in the other field. This is not because researchers are lazy or stupid. It is rather that the metaphor for disciplinary work itself – specifically, the word 'field' (as

in ‘disciplinary field’ or ‘academic field’) – is something of a misnomer. This is because, today, at least, so-called academic fields are really rather more akin to halls of mirrors, in which you can see yourself and other objects reflected back at yourself, in various shapes and sizes, but without really knowing where they are, and without being able to see anyone or anything round the corner or reflected away.

Hence my proposal that we might now want to unlearn the argument about pedagogy as a key cog or ideological apparatus in a densely reticulated socio-political terrain. The very dominance in vocational-educational-employment vocabulary of the sacred term ‘transferable skills’ attests to the fact that education is by and large not immediately connected with anything else anywhere else, without an effort of translation and transformation.

Unlearning disciplinarity may demand what Rancière once called ‘indiscipline’. There is inevitably some debate about what this might mean. I will take one final look at the field of martial arts to see whether academics might learn anything from it. My take on the key feature of the most recent revolution in martial arts pedagogy – initiated by Bruce Lee but elaborated much more fully in various directions in his wake – might be summarised like this: martial arts are to be unlearned because we have to concede that the reality that martial arts seek to master is not unified, univocal, predictable or masterable. It is not the eminently manageable and manipulable space of the dojo, dojang or kwoon. Instead, what has to be acknowledged is our ignorance of the chaos, unpredictability, and the traumatic effects of the irruption of the reality of violence. Probabilities can be played with, predicted, estimated, guesstimated –

imagined. But, to echo Paul de Man, every answer to every question in the teaching and learning of martial arts, self-defence or combat skills should really be ‘perhaps’.

The new paradigm of martial arts is based in the perceived need always to interrupt discipline before it settles down as system, and settles into the function of, as it were, offering reassurances to children – to borrow a phrase from Derrida. This is exemplified in a spectrum of approaches. On the one hand, there are fighting systems that are based on acknowledging the likelihood of the destruction of most people’s training by the chaos and violence of an attack. On the other hand, there are approaches based in psychology, sociology and certain aspects of biology (specifically around the effects of what some authors call ‘the chemical dump’, or the explosion of often completely incapacitating chemicals within one’s body in the event of attack). And so on. What all share is a principled commitment to indiscipline because of the unpredictability of reality and hence the certainty of ignorance – and the power of surprise.

The surprise attack, the surprise of violence – in fact, any surprise – can totally incapacitate anyone. But this is not necessarily negative. Surprises come from everywhere. My final anecdote. When I first began studying taiji, when my head and heart were filled with mysticism and orientalism and magic, I complained to my taiji teacher about a steep hill that I could never manage to cycle up without stopping from exhaustion. He said, that’s because you are pushing with your legs, but you have to pump from your ‘dan-tien’ (below your belly-button), and then you’ll get up the hill and do so without becoming tired at all. So, the next day I tried it. Lo and behold, what he said came true. So, when I next saw him I immediately reported, with delight

and pride, that it had worked. He said, blimey: so it is true; I've never been able to do *anything* like that; can you teach me how to do it?

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<sup>1</sup> Held at Trinity College Dublin, September 6-7<sup>th</sup> 2014. The conference was organised by Michael O'Rourke, Éamonn Dunne, Aidan Seery and Katie Guinnane (<http://www.unlearningconf.com/>).

<sup>2</sup> In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière famously denounces 'explicative' approaches to education, arguing that they 'stultify' minds and reproduce social inequality.

<sup>3</sup> The Conference 'Irrationale' is here: <http://www.unlearningconf.com/irrationale/>

<sup>4</sup> Richard Stamp has suggested that in putting it like this I have already twisted the way in which Rancière presents the outcome, because Rancière says that the son knew what other 'more learned' minds 'did not know', which in the original French is 'à savoir ce qu'ignoreraient toujours les intelligences mieux douées et plus instruites'. Accordingly, notes Stamp, the original maintains that double sense of 'never knowing' and 'always ignoring'.

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Tony Carusi for provoking this idea, who commented extensively on a draft of this paper. At this point, Carusi suggested that the foregoing passage was crying out for a discussion of the place of Lacanian *transference* here.

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<sup>6</sup> References for the points made in the previous two paragraphs are too diverse, numerous and heterogeneous to be selected. However, I have engaged with all of these points in ways consistent with my argument here in *Theorizing Bruce Lee* (Bowman 2010), *Beyond Bruce Lee* (Bowman 2013), *Martial Arts Studies* (Bowman 2015), and, of course ‘Aberrant Pedagogies’ (Bowman 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Yet it seems to me that, according to what is implied in this text about the need for the teacher to impose his will, and for the teacher to have a mode of address that reaches individuals in terms of what they know, then perhaps once we get over and above a certain size of class or number of students, or after a certain kind of distance or delay, the intimacy-effect may disappear or diminish. As we have just heard Rancière say clearly (in a way that reminds me of Morpheus enlightening Neo in *The Matrix*), ‘only individuals can be emancipated’. Of course, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière argues from the start that even a univocal mass-mediated film text still addresses us individually – all together, but all alone, as individuals. Nevertheless, unless ‘ignorant school-mastery’ boils down to the issuing of commands, via megaphone, text message or YouTube clip, then it implies a certain *numerical limit*, or indeed teacher-student *ratio*. Hyperbolically put: herein lies a potential Rancièrian ambivalence, ambiguity, or performative contradiction vis-à-vis intimacy. For, this claim about emancipation as individual is made in a *book*; a book that has not only been mass produced and mass disseminated but has also been translated into many languages and even scanned in as a PDF and uploaded to many sites and disseminated freely (albeit illegally) online; and which therefore countless people have now read. But, is Rancière saying that even if we’ve merely *read* his arguments and lessons on emancipation, then – as distant, non-face-to-face readers – we cannot therefore or thereby be emancipated? Must emancipation be face to face? In which case, why

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would Rancière waste the words to write the book? Put differently, we might ask: is Rancièrian/Jacototian pedagogy phonocentric and metaphysical in the Derridean sense? Or, in a related register: what is the status of supplementary technologies, such as the book, the DVD, the MPEG or the online video, when it comes to pedagogy, learning and unlearning?