We think: Teaching can’t be done without instructors, those who explain, who adapt their knowledge to the intellectual capacities of the pupil.
We think: There can be no progress without the mediation of such instructors.
We think: That we’re helpless without instructors.
We think: That instruction is the most efficient way to make people know.
We are surrounded by instructors: in school, church and on the street, at the dinner table, on stage or on TV.
So far, no good.

How can we begin thinking about Instruction? First, let us consider the fact that almost all of us, regardless of gender, social condition and skin colour, are able to understand and use a highly complicated system without the help of a master explicator. This system is the language of our parents, our mother tongue, which we learn successfully, all by ourselves.

This act of learning is accomplished by hearing and retaining, by imitation and repetition, by making mistakes and correcting them, by a combination of chance successes and methodical trials, by comparing and verifying the unknown against the criteria of the known. In short, by using our own general intelligence.

The child learns to speak by relying on her own intelligence in the company of ‘unconscious’ teachers (her parents and others around her), none of whom explain the rudiments of language to her. But as soon as she does master language, we insist that she cannot continue like this any longer. From that moment on we surround her with instructors and explicators.

But, to explain something to someone is, first of all, to show her she cannot understand it by herself. How come? The child learnt her mother tongue perfectly; and not only this, she taught herself how to handle things and found out how things work and don’t work. All this was done by observing and retaining, repeating and verifying, by relating what she was trying to know to what she already knew, by doing and reflecting about what she had done.

The pupil doesn’t really need the explicator; it is the other way round. It is the explicator, the instructor, who needs the pupil. It is he who categorises the pupil as the ‘incapable’. 

The Act of Instruction

Jan Ritsema
This pedagogical myth divides the world into two. More precisely, it divides intelligence into two. It says there is an inferior intelligence and a superior one. The former registers perceptions by chance, retains them, interprets and repeats them empirically, within the closed circle of habit and need. The superior intelligence knows things by reason, proceeds by method, from the simple to the complex, from the part to the whole. It is this intelligence that allows the master to transmit his knowledge by adapting it to the intellectual capacities of the student, and allows him to verify that the student has satisfactorily understood what she learned.

(We are not talking here about an old-fashioned, aged, obtuse schoolmaster who crams his students’ skulls full of poorly digested knowledge. On the contrary, we mean the enlightened pedagogue who is knowledgeable and who will say, in good faith: “The student must understand and therefore we must explain even better”. Such is the concern of the enlightened pedagogue: “If the little one doesn't understand, I will find new ways to explain it to her, ways more rigorous in principle, more attractive in form, and I will verify that she has understood”).

Unfortunately, it is just this little word, ‘understand’ – the slogan of the enlightened – that causes all the trouble. The child who is explained to will devote her intelligence to understanding that she doesn’t understand until she is explained to.

But understanding is never more than translating, delivering the equivalences of a text in terms of import or significance alone, without necessarily offering an insight into the working of its reasons. There is nothing behind a text, no false bottom that necessitates the work of an other intelligence, that of an explicator.

Whenever we come across the subordination of one intelligence to another, we witness a process of stultification.

Whoever teaches without emancipating, stultifies. Emancipation is not an extraordinary thing. It consists simply in an ordinary person taking the measure of his/her intellectual capacity and deciding how to use it, in accordance with his/her own dignity. Whoever emancipates doesn’t have to worry about what will be learnt by the person whose emancipation he desires: she will learn what she wants to. Maybe she will learn nothing.

On the other hand, the student must see everything for herself, undertake her own comparisons, and be prepared to respond to a three-pronged question: “What do you see? What do you think about what you see? What do you make out of it?”

In all this, there can be only one kind of power: that of seeing and speaking, that of paying attention to what one sees and says. One learns sentences and more sentences; one discovers facts, relations between things, and still other relations that are all of the same nature; one learns to combine letters, words, sentences, ideas. It cannot be said that in doing any or all of this that one has acquired a science, that one knows truth or has become a genius. But it will be known that in the domain of the intellect, essentially, one can do what anyone can do.

Most of what I have written till here paraphrases and summarises the first 30 pages of The Ignorant Schoolmaster, a book by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière that I have found inspiring. I would recommend it to anyone who is fed up with the repressive nature of standard methods of teaching and learning.
I am a theatre director. Sometimes I teach, which means that I give daylong workshops for several weeks to young performance artists, directors, actors, dancers, choreographers. Whether I am directing, or teaching, I find myself confronted with demands to be 'instructed'. Be they actors preparing for a piece with me, or students in a workshop, everyone wants to know what to do. I call this: "They all want to be under the roof of a task".

I often find myself faced with people who want to learn some quick techniques they can take home with them. Whenever this happens, I refuse. I can only teach what the students themselves want to be taught. And I can only do this on a collegial basis. I say to the actors and to the students: "Let's try to formulate together what we want to know or want to do or have done away with; let's try and see how we might be able to do this by beginning with considering what we already know. Can we all be and stay the masters of the process of discovering possible answers to the tasks we formulate? Can we keep the learning process transparent, so that it becomes easy for each of us to follow and control? Can we all stay emancipated and not subordinate ourselves to the authority of the one who has the answers and the expertise?"

Generally speaking, there is a lot of mystification in arts education. Many instructors will say that they feel that something that a student does “is right, it works”, without being able to express what it is that they are pointing to, and without pausing to clarify the parameters of their assessment of their students. On the other hand, there are instructors who insist that whatever has been taught by them is right, what the student does of her own accord is of little or no importance. This makes art education even more mystifying. As a teacher, I try and stay clear of both these attitudes.

But students give me a hard time. They still give me a hard time.

When I face the students, I tell them that I will not commence until they tell me what their professional concerns are, what they are working on at present and what they want to develop out of what they are doing. They have to formulate their concerns; otherwise I cannot begin working with them. For me, these (their concerns) can never be identical to 'what they want to be taught', which is never anything more than new or unfamiliar techniques and approaches which they want to learn to apply as quickly as possible.

Quite often the students refuse my proposal.

They say that they have paid for the workshop and want some clear results in return. Quite often I have had the experience of being thrown out of a workshop for being the teacher who is 'unwilling to teach what they want to be taught'. Even when I do survive in a workshop, I find that most students will refuse to teach themselves. I mainly end up with a handful of students who want to use their own capacities to make something singular and specific to the situation by responding to a problematic arising from the knowledge that the group builds by itself. These are the students who can work by themselves, who do not need me to verify, let alone assess, their doings, but who can instead use me as their sparring partner, their co-thinker. They realise that I am as curious as them, and as eager as they are for discovery.

In such situations I find it useful and affirming to remember Rancière: “Whoever looks always finds. He doesn't necessarily find what he was looking for, and even less what he
was supposed to find. But he finds something new to relate to the thing that he already
knows. What is essential is the continuous vigilance, the attention that never subsides
without irrationality setting in" (pp. 35-36).

I remain stubborn, because I know that if I make concessions and compromise I will end
up using repressive schooling methods. I know that if I ever do so, they (the actors and
students I work with) will continue to do this themselves with others as a consequence, and
that their artistic work will be repressive towards their audiences. The repressed usually
ends up looking for objects and subjects to repress in turn.

What is it that allows the thinker to scorn the worker’s contempt for the peasant (like
the peasant’s for his wife, the wife for his neighbour’s wife, and so on unto infinity)? Social
irrationality finds its formulaic expression in what could be called the paradox of the
’superior inferiors’. Here, each person is enthralled by the one he represents to himself as
his inferior, rendering him subservient to the very ‘masses’ that he pretends to be distinct
from. “Thus the social world is not simply the world of non-reason; it is that of irrationality,
which is to say, of an activity of the perverted will, possessed by inequality’s passion”
(Rancière, p. 82).

The desire to break this chain is what motivates me to remain stubborn in my practice.

In the film Scénario du Film Passion, Godard tells us how he brought a painting by
Tintoretto to the first meeting that he had with the cast and crew. He had nothing to offer by
way of ideas in this first meeting other than this painting. He wanted to start a discussion, to
develop ideas. “But”, he says, “they all started to fill it in with themselves”. Their responses in
the discussion were limited to the observation “What can I (as the cameraman or as the
actress) do with it”. They started and ended with what they knew. They didn’t want to learn
anything; they were not after anything other than what they knew about themselves or what
they thought they were good at doing. They subordinated their selves to themselves by a
process of self-explicatory moves. This too is not a means to the emancipation of the student,
because self-explication is just as stultifying and limiting as explication.

The difference between religion or belief and knowledge can be summarised as follows:
there can be no belief that makes room for doubt and no knowledge that can exist without
doubt. About knowledge we can dispute, about belief we can only fight. One cannot believe
a little bit in God, in Allah, or in reincarnation. One can’t say that it might be possible that
God exists or that reincarnation is a fact. One either believes or does not believe. A belief
demands the acceptance of unverifiable factors as an acceptable procedure in the quest
for truth. It presupposes a subordination that can only engender passive subjects.

The pedagogical myth, or that which we could also call the ‘bare law’ of pedagogy, is
that knowledge needs to be taught and that a student needs to be instructed by a teacher.
This follows from the notion that there is a gap between learning and understanding that the
ignorant (the student) has to be helped to overcome. She needs the master explicator to
explain to her what she doesn’t know, to mediate between her ignorance and the world of
knowledge.

This act of receiving the words of another as truth has its own political implications,
which operate through a system of ‘convictions’ akin to religious faith. The master explicator
explains with authority what is constructed to be ‘true knowledge’. Things are as the master has told you they are. And just as one subordinates oneself to one’s ‘faith’, so too the ‘student’ places her ‘faith’ in the instructor. The perpetuation of the ritualised inequality between the student and the instructor makes for a relationship that eventually stultifies into dependence. The master’s mode of presentation of knowledge relies on making the student dependent on his explanation. This requires the perpetuation of the student’s passivity.

In theatre, the field in which I operate, the most common practice of performance ultimately relies on the arousal of emotions in the audience. Art in general is supposed to appeal, first and foremost, to emotions. Anything else is often dismissed as dry intellectualism. The spectator, we are told, wants to be dragged into another world. She wants to experience the travails of a life remote from her own, to forget herself in order to find herself again. She sits in anticipation of being made more firmly rooted; she hopes it will happen through a reintegration of her own sense of the world into the larger world.

Emotions are states of being. Experientially, they are not unlike religious phenomena. They admit to no doubt, they just ‘are’. Thoughts and ideas we can discuss, emotions we can only fight. The ‘truths’ of performed emotions, like the truths of revealed religion or handed-down knowledge, simply declare: ‘Believe me, I feel this, I know this, it is like this, this is how I see it, how I need it to be’. But nothing is quite as simple as that. Everything is in process, everything is not just something that ‘is’; rather, everything is in the process of ‘becoming’. Nothing can be simply a monad, an isolate, an entity that begins and ends with itself. Each particular is only an instance of the universal manifesting itself in disparate ways.

I see an analogy between my desire for the emancipation of the student and the need I feel for the emancipation of the modern theatre spectator. The stultification which usually takes place in theatre has to do with the subordination of the intelligence of the spectator to the sentimental and spectacular mechanisms that entertain her. The spectator is invited to observe the performance – a spectacle – from the seat in the dark auditorium with the necessary pathos of distance. She is literally spoken to, and figuratively spoken in the name of, by the performers on stage. The performance succeeds to the extent to which it enacts what is otherwise impossible for spectator to experience (the overwhelmingly great, or the infinitely small, the socially/psychologically ‘abnormal’, the aesthetic ideals of beauty and fragility, as well as the ethics of consolation). Or, on the contrary, it may mirror the dramas of everyday life with an extraordinary fidelity.

But in either case, it represents a difference, in terms of experience that is upheld for the spectator to either identify with, or recognise herself in. The performance explicates in that it does the work for the spectator: playing “as-if” and sucking the spectator into its vortex of meaning and affect by stimulating her desire to identify and fill the event with her presence. In the economy of everyday life, the time spent at the theatre, the evening out at a performance, serves to address the need for the intense and instant condensation of vicarious feeling that is part of the attraction of a live event. The attendance at the theatre is a ritual of voluntary subordination on the spectator’s part to the power of higher, more intense, experiences than she can allow herself to feel in daily life.
An emancipated spectator, on the other hand, to follow again Rancière’s thought, is invited to participate in the intellectual challenge of observing, relating, comparing and verifying what she sees with what she knows and feels. For this to happen, there has to be a desire to do the work of entering into new relationships, and a will to discover new ways of relating to the world and to people. This entails the spectator taking the risk of allowing herself to not be impressed or overwhelmed by stable opinions about people, the world, the artist, and of being willing to express her own views on the human condition, on the self and on fellow people.

When a performance is driven by the will to explore, to discover, rather than to confirm that which is already known in order to communicate the safety of mutual recognition, it invites the spectator to emancipate herself. Then it presents itself to its audience as an object for exploration. An exploration that can be embarked upon by both performers and spectators from the foundation of the consciousness of equality. Such an ethic of performance declares the sovereignty of everybody’s intelligence.

Conventionally, performances are made to be looked at. The spectators look at the actors, at the performance. I seek out a situation where a performance can look back at the viewers, where actors can return the gaze to their spectators. A performance that looks back at its viewers, regards its audience in the plural, as an ensemble of emancipated spectators, whose points of access to the performance, whose levels of understanding and whose bodies of experience are necessarily differentiated.

I try to make performances that don’t seek to unite the audience in a consensus, even as I do not desire to split them in an apparent struggle over moral binaries. Instead, I try to stimulate them to think further by advancing certain propositions, by offering a thought, a mode of reasoning, a bodily movement that embodies what it means to be immersed in a thought-process. Thus at the end of the performance I hope that they can exit the theatre without leaving their chairs. I hope that the time spent in being ‘looked back at’ during a performance can help them make meaningful relationships between their sentience and the realities of the world outside their lives. I hope that this can happen without the panic of losing themselves in the heterogeneity of other worlds, other intelligences and registers of thought and affect that are not their own, and that might connect to their thinking bodies.

What has been stated here is not some utopia for the construction of an other world in and through theatre or performance. There is no other world. There is only the activity which emancipates us in this world. It keeps me, and I hope the spectators I manage to reach, out of, and away from, the self-reappropriation that became the primary function of the theatre (following from the demise of the church), and made it the moral institution of the middle classes.

For us, unlike Hamlet, there isn’t only silence that remains. And, what remains for us to do is to persist with the multiplication of ideas and actions.

NOTES