Relational freedom and equality in learning: the affect of Sartre and Rancière

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Word count: 6934

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Abstract

The will to have freedom and a will to experience equality in learning form a vital relation to our capacity to make choices in life. This article offers a comparison between Sartre and Rancière that is new to the field of research in education, and contributes an argument for relational philosophy of freedom and equality. Existentialist insights into how we experience the world through affect and embodied intelligence are raised in this exploration of the contemporary significance of 'freedom' in education. Questions of capacity for free choice are addressed, in discussion of historically different opportunities across identifications of gender, class and ethnicity - within and outside formal education. In this comparative approach, constructive parallels are identified between Sartre's philosophy of freedom and Rancière's method of equality, that form a new relation to the arts and learning. I argue that there are positive connections that can affirm flexible, responsive, and representative free thinking in creative practice.

Keywords**:** affect, creativity, embodiment, emancipation, Jacques Rancière, Jean-Paul Sartre, method, relational freedom, will

Introduction

If we begin with the intention to learn, and to question the choices we make along this learning pathway, we may make discoveries that alter our relation to being-in-the-world. Experiences encountered on such routes of discovery often require the need for changes in thought, feeling and action. In this article I will argue that the critical flexibility we need to make these changes can be enabled by starting out with a view of self and others as being free and equal. I will discuss how this ethos corresponds with methods of creative practice research, connecting with Sartre and Rancière. With this starting point, I take into account that questions are raised about whether all in society

have equal opportunities to express their free choices. I consider how these philosophies offer ways of valuing the choices made by those in differing social circumstances, and how interventions for free learning can be made in pedagogy and the arts.

A comparative interpretation of the works of Sartre and Rancière is new to the field of educational research, and I will explore how relational connections between their texts have contemporary relevance, in connection with concepts of affective presence in learning. Rancière states in *The Method of Equality* (2016) that Sartre was his 'first way into philosophy' (3) and that *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007), published from a lecture Sartre gave in 1945, was the first philosophical text he read, aged 17. I will later connect with a specific passage in this text in which a relationship between the two philosophers can be found. The aspect of wonder in discovery, in the process of active free learning, is something that Rancière maintains throughout. He discusses active engagement, that Sartre calls 'creative action' (Sartre 2010, 181), saying 'Personally I have always thought, it's my old Sartrean roots – that you are first and foremost what you *do.'* (Rancière 2016, 119)

This comparative approach could build understandings of how we activate 'intelligence', which Rancière defines as the capacity for learning without a master (1991, 2009, 2016). Rancière offers a shift in value for the experience of autodidactic learning, that is being self-taught; this shift displaces value for learning from a teacher who is seen as an authority. Learning without a master requires critical self-reflection, in aiming to achieve targets set for oneself, and reviewing those targets. This reflective process offers a resilience that draws upon curiosity to find out about the world through experimentation. We could say that freedom of intelligence releases the ability to creatively solve problems, through being receptive to new experiences.

The emancipation of intelligence through a 'method of equality' (Rancière 2009, 2016) is one example of how Rancière translates discussions of freedom into those of equality (Dunlap 2015). Rancière's method of equality has had significant impact; according to Suoranta he 'has radicalised the educational thinking of the Enlightenment' (Suoranta 2015, 2). This radicalisation among practitioner researchers includes a focus on valuing equality as it supports inclusivity in learning (Sayers 2014), through interventions that enable voices from those in a minority to emerge with confidence in different spaces of practice. Rancière offers examples of ways in which, at times unexpectedly, people have been able to take ownership of their learning experiences. Later we will encounter some of Rancière's observations of the will to learn in action.

I also discuss how an awareness of methods of equality in learning can relate to contemporary readings of Sartre, as for example in the recent translation of *Being and Nothingness* by Sarah Richmond (2018). My new contribution encourages comparative readings that affirm the practice of freedom in learning, and connect with existence in the 'now' of current experience and arts practice. The immanence of *being* is also present in Rancière's value for everyone's ability to form knowledge in relation to the contingencies of their experience (1991).

In this article I will explore issues for educators and students (Karran 2009), via Sartre in connection with Rancière. The concept of freedom requires some defence in the context of performance driven cultures in education (Wilkins 2016, Atkinson 2018); I argue that free thinking is vital for developmental processes in learning, for inclusive representation in learning, and for the creative expression of ideas. I then enter further into an affirmative relation between the works of Sartre and Rancière, focusing on participatory responses to art and creative writing. This approach may be seen to build on Zane Shaw's 'mutually constructive' interpretation (2012, 29), as I contribute

insights in the arts and learning, for relational freedom and equality in philosophy and practice.

A value for reflective practice in education as 'the freedom for everyone of his [her/their] individual *praxis*' (Sartre 2004, 38) has implications for how we could make choices in learning, on a cross-curricular basis, in schools and universities. It is worth questioning whether we have the capacity to create more flexibility and agency in education. Sartre had a view of agency that identifies with self-awareness and engagement in 'creative action' (Sartre 2010, 181) – such as research, teaching, writing and making art, philosophy, social action and intervention. Self-awareness also enters into Sartre's view of subjectivity, as 'presence-to' self (Sartre 2018, 181). I have worked with the sense of *being* as affective 'presence-to' self, when inquiring into ways of expressing agency, and investigating how we could encourage problem posing, and engagement with discomfort zones in learning environments (Matthews 2018). For instance, when we listen to students in minority groups, and encourage them to freely express their thinking, feeling and experience, this reflexive relation to self-representation can build more long-term action for equality in cultural learning spaces (Ahmed 2014, Bhambra et al 2018).

Sartre was anti-colonialist and he supported Frantz Fanon's goals for decolonisation (2001, 2018). He had a long-term relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, a groundbreaking philosopher of women's experiences and gender equality, and dedicated his major work *Being and Nothingness* to her (Richmond, in Sartre 2018, xxx). When building discursive understandings of freedom, agency and otherness, Sartre can also be read with these philosophers, and others such as Hall or Foucault. If we take a position of equality, they do not lose their 'hand' as Ahmed (2014, 203) states in respect to Fanon, meaning that we can sustain the significance of their arguments.

A point in favour of the comparison with Rancière is that in expanding understandings of freedom towards equality of access and representation, Rancière does not leave equality in learning unspoken or unwritten. Responding to the question of how his philosophy relates to systemic and historical conditions, he says that 'inequality is perfectly capable of taking care of itself' and that 'all inequality functions with the submission of the unequal' (112). Those inner feelings of injustice need social expression, in creative practice, politicised voice and discursive education between boundaries or 'thresholds' of social participation (Rancière 2016). With a method of equality, we can listen to different arguments and explore their relevance to contemporary education, culture and society, in an inclusive decolonisation of learning (Bambara, Gabriel and Nişancioğlu, 2018).

In extending our academic freedom for debate, we are increasing agency in education. I define the term 'agency' as being able to make a choice in a given contingent situation, by using resources of will and capacity. For Sartre agency occurs as the freedom to *decide to* make a choice (Jaarsma, Kinashuk and Xing 2016). This activation of choice relates equally to Rancière's '*will served by an intelligence*' (Rancière 1991, 52) and foundational 'method of equality' (Ibid., 12), in that these concepts address questions of how people in diverse social situations can take up opportunities to learn.

My approach to the question of how our insights into agency could be shaped by precedent and by the immediate environment – such as the conditioning structures of schools and universities, is to reflect on what freedom in learning means both within and outside the structures of formal education. I have recognised active freedom in students' self-generated and dialogical learning in schools, universities, galleries, museums and community settings. I find that the encouragement of this form of agency

enables a breathing space from the expectations of formal learning, that can release capacity to take more confident decisions and be more vocal within learning experiences (Matthews 2018b). Learning pathways as 'roads of freedom' need to be able to travel in and out of education systems (Sartre 2009). It is the extra-curricular forays of experimentation connection, in a 'relationship of being with other beings' (Sartre 2018, 181) that signify freedom in Sartre's writing, and enable significant relations to learning.

Some argue that there are difficulties in pursuing Rancière's view of equality in self-generated learning within formal education systems (Pelletier 2010, Mercieca 2012). Yet conversations around freedom and equality do need to take place in schools and universities, as students put forward their views, and educators try to make plans that enable choice in learning processes. These discussions also take place in galleries, community centres, and in many sites of 'public pedagogy' – where participants might freely choose to make active communities of learning (Kitagawa 2017, 7). As Rancière notes, human beings in reality are 'always taking part in several worlds' (2016, 61).

To put forward a comparative approach between Sartre and Rancière, my proposal is that Rancière's investigation of the will to learn corresponds with Sartre's view of 'will' as 'free being – being as a project' (Sartre 2007, 44). Freedom as self-committal to a project can bring a sense of fulfilment, through reviewing commitment to initial intentions in the light of experience, reflecting on targets set for realisation, and then setting new goals.

The existentialist focus on freedom as it is a 'thirst' for self-realisation or 'plenitude' (Sartre 2018, 284) is often situated within a humanist tradition. Criticism of this tradition focuses on the limitations of addressing *being in the world* through a male rationalist subject, that privileges intellectual processes over emotional responses

(Braidotti 2013, 5). However if we look - for example, at the treatment of emotions in *Being and Nothingness* (2018), there is a significant discussion of affect in the human condition through 'fear of fear' (2018, 67) consciousness of 'anguish' (85) and 'sadness' (2018, 105). Sartre considers human 'desire', in response to experience of 'lack' (Sartre 2018, 139) and this desire corresponds with a will to learn. He also defends existentialism against the criticism that it encourages negativity, emphasising freedom as it underpins the positive 'brighter side of human nature' (2007, 17). There is a clear connection with emotional and sensory experience in the midst of intellectual freedom. Could we therefore open a free thinking space, with reference to Sartre, that is supportive of our explorations of affective and embodied learning experiences?

Sartre offers critical resources for a practice of freedom, in thought and embodiment through action. We are often denied choices that we would like to make: perhaps a subject area that a student wants to take up in school already has a full quota, or perhaps there are extracurricular learning opportunities that are available to some and not others. How do we exercise choice in these circumstances? Sartre and Rancière situate the *will* as a crucial factor in the process of learning through experience, since we need determination to pursue other routes to our objectives when certain routes are 'foreclosed' (Charland 2010). Sartre terms this form of self-determination 'motive-consciousness' (Sartre 2018, 659).

An ethos that begins with a value for freedom and equality could address the ways in which choices are made, and how experiences of freedom are registered. For instance, a person with disabilities can enjoy new learning experiences, and feel liberation in these experiences, although ways of accessing learning opportunities may differ from those available to the able bodied. I am making the point here that such

considerations invite philosophical and discursive methods for increasing representation of diversity. I found that it was possible to unpack Sartrean concepts - for example in discussions of free will, responsibility and creative action with sixth-form vocational art and design students aged 16-19. These interventions through practice included students with social and economic disadvantages, who had previously found it difficult to expand from experiences of limitation (Matthews 2018b).

Although Rancière found a connection with Sartre at 17, he later took issue with Sartre in response to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1983). In *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983/ 2004), Rancière argues that Sartre constructs a 'Philosopher's Wall', in the text - prioritising freedom of thought, without considering how that might be a privilege unavailable to the proletariat (2004, 138). He engages with, but then dismisses the *Critique* as a 'merely a long response' to Merleau-Ponty's view on how a philosopher may try to connect with a world of material forces beyond their powers for intervention (Rancière 2003, 142). Rancière contends with Sartre's philosophical legacy through this response to the *Critique*.

I think it is important to note that Rancière was a member of the same radical political group as Sartre in the 1960's, the *Gauche Prolétarienne*, that aimed to connect striking workers with intellectual activists (Suoranta 2016); at that point they would have shared some political motivations. Rancière developed a polemic style that is political in its origins and contributes to his egalitarian politics of learning (Soudien and Harvey 2020). Rancière's later response to Sartre philosophically prepares for what he terms, 'the pleasure of a new freedom' (Rancière 2003, 277). He discusses the free thought of the working class autodidact who uses their '*will served by an intelligence*' (1991, 52) without the instruction of 'a master explicator' (12). This concept of the learner as self-starter enters into debates of the role of the educator, and in this way

Rancière 'entwines pedagogy with the social order' (Lambert 2009, 302). I will discuss how Rancière's method of equality relates with the cultural interventions made by artworks in learning spaces.

To identify further connective patterns between Sartre and Rancière, we could look at how Rancière takes issue with Bourdieu, 'The Sociologist King', describing his work as 'an interminable refutation of Sartrean freedom' (Rancière 2003, 165). He contends that Bourdieu takes a relentless approach to arguing existential freedom out of the process of being. Rancière's focal educator Jacotot is termed 'the anti-Bourdieu' by Kristin Ross (2009, 25), and he says that 'Sartre meant distance in relation to psychological and sociological analyses.' (2016, 47) Noting this observation, I think there is an opening for a relational comparison between the works of Rancière and Sartre. The discussion will turn now to Sartre's ideas of freedom in learning. My comparison between Sartre and Rancière will then be extended, towards a view of relational freedom and equality in affective, creative practice.

Free will and learning

Sartre's reflections on freedom in learning emerge through philosophical encounters with daily existence. With an existential approach, we are encouraged to learn through navigating the contingencies of our situation. Sartre brings into view the student's capacity to make life changing decisions, outside the formal curriculum of schools or universities. He moved away from a value for social conditioning in education that is a construction of an 'awaited man' or woman (1972, 237), who would take up an expected profession, according to their social class.

An instance of Sartre's views on learning processes can be found in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1945/2007), where the traditional roles of teacher as *instructor* and student as *recipient* of learning are critiqued through a question of ethics.

Sartre describes how a philosophy student came to see him with the issue of whether he should leave his mother to join the French Free Forces in England (30). This experience could relate to many pastoral situations in which an educator is called upon to offer advice to a student. At such times we may use our professional judgment to decide whether to address the situation, refer the student to a counsellor or say that they need to make their own decision. Sartre's response in this case was: 'you are free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do can show you what you ought to do: there are no signs in this world.' (33). Here Sartre is approached as a source of knowledge and refuses to shape the student's life choices: he therefore affirms the student's capacity to make ethical decisions.

In this case Sartre prioritises free will in learning, and the student's spark of agency in working through an ethical dilemma (Matthews 2018b). Sartre as philosopher and educator signals a turning point, which corresponds with Rogoff's 'educational turn' (Rogoff 2008, Graham, Graziano and Kelly 2016) so that we can visualise the removal of social constraints upon our life choices. *Existentialism is a Humanism,* as noted earlier, was a turning point for Rancière - as a doorway to philosophy.

For students who have experienced a sense of obligation to learn in a particular way, according to systems of expectation, Sartre offers support for critical action to liberate self-development: the subject 'will be what he makes of himself' (Ibid., 28). We can include in brackets female and non-binary gender identification in this statement, to reflect on possibilities for a non-binary perspective of *being* in contemporary education – so that *a person will be the self of their own making,* with 'the will to change' (hooks, 2004).

The inclusion of the full spectrum of gender associations in this approach to freedom raises the question of whether in doing so we would be denying the context of Sartre's literature within a history of masculine presence in philosophy and academia. I think it is possible to revisit these constructions of freedom, to challenge the dominance of the masculine subject in our readings, and to listen to their meaning in the context of 'herstories' and 'theirstories'. To activate freedom in learning through recontextualisation, I refer to contemporary artists who exercise freedom by situating themselves in images from art history. Sartre said, 'Has anyone ever blamed an artist for not following the rules …established *a priori*?' (2007, 45).

Artists who resituate their gender include Cindy Sherman – a white woman photographer who morphs her identity in each photoshoot. Yasumasa Morimura – a non-binary Asian artist, situates their presence in recreated paintings of female subjects. Yinka Shonibare has re-enacted historical artworks where a black person would have been a marginalised subject, to situate himself at the centre of that social world. The presence of a subject with a different ethnicity or gender, in what was a painting of a white man or woman, does not erase those histories of privilege and oppression; however the new juxtaposition puts historically embedded expectations for aesthetics, self-representation and social participation into perspective, and can stir the need for review of our constructions of the past that inform the present.

Awareness of Self and Others

If learning is viewed as a process of investigation, reflection and appreciation that happens throughout life, an existentialist narrative of being – an ontology, offers a choice of critical tools for liberating self and others. The existentialist subject with free will is explored in *Being and Nothingness*, through Sartre's presentation of three interactive modes of self: *being-in-itself, being-for-itself and being-for-others*.

Sartre represents the mode of *being-in-itself* as the pre-conscious, and as past experience that is compacted as 'a synthesis' of self (Sartre 2018, 28). An example of how it operates in subjectivity can be found in the way one packs away the single lines of grades and qualifications on a CV, as the brief outlines of past goals in life. This shorthand for past experience forms a concrete platform for the subject to create a present sense of social standing.

In contrast, *being-for-itself* is the active mode of self that seeks outside the past and current circumstances, moving into the 'nothingness' of that which is yet to happen. The for-itself forms consciousness, through a relation to the in-itself, in an expansive process that Sartre terms a 'decompression of being' (123). This decompressing or unpacking process builds our recognition of what it means to be in the world, and opens space for new experiences as 'a numberless realm of possibilities' (O'Shiel, 2015, 276), that we can begin to map through reflection and practice. The for-itself is characterised by Sartre as a 'lack', a need to 'drink' in the surroundings (Sartre 2018, 207); it is a restless urge that drives individuals to notice what they are missing of the outside world. This concept relates to approaches to learning that look at education as a project of self-fulfilment, of 'building a life' (Atkinson 2018, 6) and reaching out into the unknown.

Sartre investigates intersubjective relations via *being-for-others*. This mode of self emerges as we consider how the other regards us through their 'look', which is experienced as a spotlight of social expectations. He notes that this awareness of ourselves as co-existent, 'thus the look has set us on the path of our being-for-the-Other.' (Sartre 2018, 383). For example, we can observe this 'path' in social constructions of gender that condition how we see ourselves in relation to others.

In the 'human project' of free will, there is space for a navigation of social conditioning through what Sartre in *Notebooks for an Ethics* calls 'active discovery'

(1992, 481). Young people with different gender associations can also envisage themselves scaling the mountain of patriarchy in education, as did Sartre's lifelong partner Simone de Beauvoir (1997). Although change is gradual, supportive interventions that validate self-belief can open critical debate and catalyse learning inquiries that extend beyond limiting conditions in society. The unrealisables of today could be the accepted realities of the future.

I consider Sartre's concept of free will in educational practice, as a relational freedom. This term takes into account the actions of the self in the contingency of the learning environment, including the self's creative adjustments in response to their *being-for-others* - with tutors and fellow students. Detmer noted that the dismissive 'official interpretation' (1988, 37) of Sartre's ontology is that that his concept of freedom is oblivious to the existence of others. Rae also rejects this reductive interpretation, and discusses the potential for connecting with others as the 'we-relation' in Sartre (Rae 2009, 54). According to Rae, a more accurate view of Sartre is that effective connections can be made with others but they require careful consideration, reviewed commitments and sometimes struggle.

There is an ethical implication in our recognition that we are co-existent with others in the world; social awareness must also be brought into *consciousness of* ourselves, as being among other beings in our ecological environment. This awareness liberates Sartre's existential subject from isolation, in what Damon Boria terms a 'vision of interdependence' (2014, 33). A relational concept of freedom for self and others corresponds with recent reflections on affect and empathy, as we form understandings of the world (Braidotti 2013, 78, Atkinson 2018).

Active, Creative and Questioning

Existentialism encourages us to question passive learning patterns and invite active

participation (Detmer 2005). When young people have the space to talk about choices they would like to make, they can also discuss issues in society that they feel are holding them back (Matthews 2018b). In these discussions we may begin with a question such as, 'What would you do if you could make your choices in complete freedom?' With the premise that everyone is free, the self is placed in the condition of being *already free,* and can feel empowered to transform the 'unrealisables' (Sartre 2018, 688) of the given situation. I would explain this through observing that in some cases a philosophical perspective of free will can assist what may be called 'mind over matter'; this expression may refer to 'matter' as social issue or 'matter' as physical presence. If we resource learning opportunities that seek to invent new ways of relating to the matter in hand, we could potentially build stronger bridges between the current unrealisables and future realities. With this approach the imaginative being-for-itself of young people can take 'flight' (283).

Sartre presents an approach to education which invites us to develop resistance and ask questions of the demands made of us, as for the young man questioning whether he should stay with his mother or join the French Free Forces. The choices we would like to make are not always realisable in the complexity of our social conditions, but through the visual representation or performance of these conditions, a space can be made for visualising alternatives.

An appreciation of the symbiotic relationship between freedom and responsibility can be recognised in many forms of learning interaction between students and teachers. For example, at all levels of education and throughout academia, free speech as the 'free project of the sentence' (540) must anticipate reactions of difference and at times the need for social mediation to work through disagreement. Students need to have space to articulate experiences of what it is like to have to negotiate the

transitions of experience and conditioning expectations that educational institutions present.

As I noted earlier in relation to new and more equal relationships of gender, class and ethnicity, Sartre recognises that there are many forms of freedom and transitions of being, stating that 'To be free is to-be-free-to-change' (Sartre 2018, 659). Jaarsma et al state that 'Freedom's capacity to begin again – is inseparable from the plurality of human existence' (2016, 458). Rancière also acknowledges this plurality saying,

> There are heaps of lives that play out between several worlds, that are built on the art of living both within the precariousness of a particular set of conditions and within the luxury of thought.' (Rancière 2016, 171)

I will now discuss further connections in the texts that are significant for contemporary approaches to freedom and equality in learning, as this 'luxury of thought' might be more accessible.

Sartre and Rancière: A view over the wall

This study is an addition to literature that takes a view over the philosopher's wall between Sartre and Rancière - with a particular focus on freedom in learning, as this relates to the participatory responses to art and creative writing. Bingham and Biesta in *Jacques Rancière*: *Education, Truth, Emancipation* (2010) say that 'there is an obvious existentialist streak in Rancière' (145). The preface to their book was written by Rancière, so this 'streak' could be tacitly agreed - as his 'Sartrean self'. The existentialist connection is also highlighted by Hallward, in *Rancière History, Politics and Aesthetics* (2009). Hallward notes that Rancière's stance in rejecting determinism as 'thoughtless necessity' is similar to Sartre's 'account of conscious freedom as

indeterminate being-for-itself' (141). This observation reflects on statements such as this by Rancière:

> The method of equality was above all a method of the will. One could learn by oneself and without a master explicator when one wanted to, propelled by one's own desire or by the constraint of the situation. (Rancière 1991, 9)

To add to Hallward's recognition of this connection between the 'motive-consciousness' of *being-for-itself* and Rancière's 'desire' to contend with the materiality of existence, we could reflect on how Sartre and Rancière present the 'will' as a concept of freedom in learning. Rancière argues that we need to act as though equal in the present, rather than aiming towards a future equality. We would also need to begin with the premise of free will for all, to be able to pursue a will to learn that can scope and address obstructive factors on our life journeys – such as social prejudice and conditioned expectations of gender, class, ethnicity and able-bodyism.

The areas of connection that I will discuss between Sartre and Rancière are 1) the comparisons that may be made between their philosophies of will and freedom in learning and 2) parallels that can be observed between their presentation of critical difference, via creative works that disrupt convention.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) Rancière forms an exchange with the work of 19th century teacher and philosopher Joseph Jacotot, to explore the meaning of equality in education. Rancière tells us that Jacotot discovered his method of 'universal teaching' by finding himself in a position in which he had to teach Flemish students French, knowing no Flemish himself. To address this situation, Jacotot made use of what we hear is his only available resource – a dual translation of *Telemachus, Son of Ulysses*, by Fénélon; this is itself a literary treatise on equality, first published in 1699. In this work which is considered to be an important political text, a character called

'Mentor', who is Minerva the goddess of wisdom in disguise, appears to tutor Telemachus, who has to travel widely to learn to situate himself as one being in a world of others (Fénélon, 1994). It is presented as an accidental text, all that was available, but perhaps in reading Fénélon the Flemish students were able to form their own imagination of what a liberating mentoring role might be?

With an initial explanation of the task from a translator, the students were asked to learn the content of the text by comparing the French and Flemish used in the text. They were then asked to shift out of this didactic learning phase, to move around the language they had learned and write essays in French. As the students succeeded in doing this through self-taught processes, Jacotot concluded that everyone has equal intelligence, to teach themselves what they want to learn and to take ownership of their education. There is a rhetorical, polemic style to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster,* and Rancière states that it is strengthened by the possibility that it could be a work of invention, 'a fiction that I might well have made up completely.' (2016, 69)

Initially I discussed how Sartre's illumination of the importance of the student's self-direction is present in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Sartre's text predates Althusser (1964) as Rancière's stated influence, in relation to his criticism of the formal teaching situation as '*an inequality between a knowledge and a non-knowledge*' (Ross citing Althusser 1964, in Ibid. xvi). However Rancière sought alternative voices to conduct the current of his thinking, through ten years of archival research. Gabriel Gauny, a joiner who learned in philosophy through autodidactic methods, is noted for his representation of what it means to have agency, as powers which 'no will but his own activates' (Gauny cited in Rancière 2009, 274). Rancière had access to Gauny's archives from the 1830's to the 1890's, representing a significant span of history (Rancière 2016, 31). The method of sifting archival material for individual

philosophical voices locates the importance of research in being able to teach oneself, for the 'pleasure of a new freedom'. In this process Rancière brings to light the impassioned, affective connections that autodidactic learners make with their own discoveries. This is also an observation of how the working classes can engage in emancipatory reading for pleasure (Cremlin 2014).

Differences between Sartre and Rancière's concepts of what it means to be self-taught are found in comparing the representation of Gauny with Sartre's portrayal of 'the Autodidact' (Sartre 2000). This character is initially presented through his façade of learning, from books in a library. The Autodidact wears this learning awkwardly like a 'huge stiff collar' (48). According to Zane-Shaw, Rancière argues against Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* saying that it represents a 'rejection of "the elastic intervals of the autodidact" (Zane-Shaw citing Rancière 2012, 30). For Sartre it appears that learning is limited unless it is situated in response to the world of *being-for-others*. For Rancière however books are tools for liberation, since they provide the building materials for an articulate communication of social equality. Gauny, who reflects on his own will to self-governance, represents a commendable form of self development through reading without the instruction of an educator as 'master explicator' (Rancière 1991,12).

Rancière's debate of the value of free autodidactic learning on 'the island of the book' (Rancière 1991, 20) is positioned towards a more a self-oriented review of goals – as when learning to translate one language to another in comparison with one's prior understanding and subsequent ability to use the new language effectively. In Sartre's existentialism, the concepts of *being-for-others* and *being-in-the-world* (Sartre 2018) situate agency in a raised consciousness of the self in relation to others and the environment.

If we are instead to locate connections of freedom in learning, I have here noted active engagement in a task or a project, presence-to current experiences, capacity to change, choice in learning matter and the *will* to learn without a master. There are also constructive parallels in their treatment of *freedom of thought*, as found in creative works that challenge conventions in society. Sartre's literary works make creative interventions that were intended to encourage the comfortable middle classes to question their sense of assurance and entitlement. As Michael Scriven observes, Sartre aimed to 'radicalise literature' so that it could participate 'in the socio-political events of the contemporary world' (Scriven 1984, 10). It is clear that Sartre felt that creative literature could intervene in such political experiences, in what may be seen as an educational 'turn' (Rogoff 2008) against oppressive conventions.

The radical action of artworks is also present in Rancière's *Dissensus*, in which he states that critical artworks act as 'a sensory form of "strangeness." (Rancière 2010, 142). The interjection of 'strangeness' in an art exhibition, a work of literature or performance, is a creative freedom that invites the audience to feel differently, and perhaps to be unsettled enough to question 'stultified' (Rancière 1991) or 'inert' (Sartre 2004) responses to the 'aesthetic regime' of culture and society (Lampert 2017, 185). Instances of what Rancière sees as an intervention of 'strangeness' in learned social patterns occur in Sartre's novels, which propose that readers stir 'abstract souls' that 'have never allowed themselves to be affected by the meaning of a face' (Sartre 2000, 173). One could say that this is a demand for an affective response from the reader – or the audience.

An artwork, in a gallery or public building, makes an intervention on the surface of social structures, as can a literary text. Sometimes, though not always, these interventions resonate with an audience for an affective response. The artwork in itself

is not the activator, for Rancière the artwork's potential is completed by the audience. Some of these creative interventions intend to be more troubling of society's social structures than others. This troubling of surfaces offers a 'demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible' (Rancière 2010, 38) that can reveal social *dissensus*. Artist educators have brought the *The Method of Equality* (2009, 2016) to these altered surfaces, to explore the 'gaps' in how meaning is constructed for us.

Rancière's writing on the introduction of strangeness continues to input to work I do with postgraduate students, and to public engagement partnerships with galleries, that aim to open up cultural spaces to diverse audiences, who may freely voice new interpretations and interventions. I refer to Rancière when encouraging reflective thinking about the will to learn in relation to the challenge of encountering new experiences. I have found that discussion of Rancière's texts supports critically engaged arts pedagogy, that enables students to articulate their experiences of art's disruption to comfort zones. A group of postgraduate students were introduced to visiting artists who challenged their expectations of how an artist 'should' interrelate with their audience; I responded to their discomfort by reading a passage of *Dissensus* (Rancière 2010) for a discursive reflection. I referred to Rancière's concept of art's introduction of strangeness, for an expansion on how art can defamiliarise the familiar, to reveal a 'gap the sensible'. In this way we worked with a perceived gap in understanding, so that students could start to form their own questions of their experience, and 'decompress' the sensory impact and meaning of the artwork encountered (Matthews 2019). This instance of responsive practice, was a significant event in developing a more lateral and discursive engagement with artists' presentations of their work.

Through the introduction of strangeness, artists present the possibility of altered aesthetic and social relations, and an acknowledgement of difference (Ruitenberg 2011);

this process moves learning into discomfort zones where equality can be expressed. Some free speech can be uncomfortable to listen to. Contemporary artists such as Jacob V. Joyce of 'Sorry you feel uncomfortable' (Royal Academy, 23 April 2017) make apparent the relation of discomfort to equality, as perceptions are forced to shift and prejudices are unseated in experiencing artwork. If we are going to learn something new in any field it will appear at first as 'radically exterior' (Zhao 2013, 523), before a connection with prior experiences can be found. Artist educators also defamiliarise the familiar in releasing creativity from conventions of practice; for example flexibility of response is encouraged through exercises such as drawing with the non-dominant hand.

If as educators we resource teaching with methods of freedom and equality in learning, such as those explored by Rancière and Sartre, interventions have been made in experiences of social inequality that assert students' capability to demonstrate equal presence. One could say that it depends *how learning exchanges take place* as to whether an introduction of philosophy, or cultural theory, is supportive to creative and academic freedom. Educators often need to change their pedagogies according to the responses of students (Atkinson 2018). Perhaps in offering more space for individual reflection we can acknowledge what Rancière terms the solitary 'orbit' of investigation in autodidactic free learning? (1991, 59, also Atkinson 2018, 113). On the other hand, in support of Sartre's view of learning through *being-in-the-world*, we can gain a lot through problem-posing in shared experiences of learning, including the flexibility for 'conceptual change' (Hodgson, Benson and Brack 2015, 580). Sartre and Rancière raise the difficulties of forming an inclusive consensus or a 'we-relation' (Rae 2009). In working through these difficulties, we find processes for mapping the complexity of learning experiences. Methods of freedom and equality, in creative practice are ways in

which we can learn to balance differences in our experience of 'otherness that has a multiplicity of inscription and of forms of alteration and dissent' (Rancière 2010, 61).

Reflective journeys outside the formalities of the institution are also vital to this development of an understanding of relational freedom in the 'school without walls' (Paris and Hay 2019). My comparative discussion of relational freedom and the will to learn is intended to support inclusive cultural spaces, that validate all learners' cultural backgrounds in transition through their new experiences (Dash 2010, Ahmed 2014). These experiences of action, presence and connection may happen through direct contact with relevant primary sources - for example when interacting with cultural artefacts at galleries, theatres and museums, in the affective digital presence of online learning, or in critical and sensory responses to the urban environment and nature (Pink 2008). Such encounters have the potential to generate the affective change that can bring forth self-recognition and 'motive-consciousness', in creative negotiation and action.

Conclusion

In proposing productive connections between the works of Sartre and Rancière, I have demonstrated how this comparative approach contributes to contemporary reflections on what it means to be free and equal in learning. One of the key intentions of this article is to unpack comparative connections that can be accessible to practice in the arts. The philosophical argument is for a positive, comparative relation to Sartre and Rancière. This article respectfully sustains the point that the connections made could be explored further. I have omitted some parallels I found, which could be included in a longer study. In the spirit of self-guided learning, readers could also enjoy their own discoveries of freedom and equality in reading texts such as *Existentialism is a Humanism* and *The Method of Equality*.

Beginning with Rancière's own statement that Sartre was his first philosophical influence, and with early political connections with Sartre, I have presented interpretations of the texts that offer relevant connections. In the first instance I referred to Rancière's response to Sartre's work, through *The Philosopher and his Poor*. Significant connections indicated by Rancière in *The Method of Equality* were also explored. I have positioned 'freedom' in learning as choice, agency in decision making, capacity to engage with emotion, connect with others and be a vocal participant in social change. Additionally, I have raised similarities between Rancière's method of equality in learning as 'will to intelligence', and Sartre's concept of 'free will' as liberating self-definition. Sartre's concept of *being-for-itself* could contribute to the mapping of practice, in the 'thirst' for new experiences. My observations were situated in relation to how an equivalent of free *being-for-itself* emerges in Rancière, as the urge to take ownership of learning and fulfill '*intellectual capacity*' (Rancière 1991, 27, also Rancière 2016, 72).

Rancière contributes interventions that offer a view of how the arts add new, sometimes initially strange and different sensory experiences of learning, that disrupt the 'sensible' (Lambert 2009, Bingham and Biesta 2010, Sayers 2014, Atkinson 2018). I have observed that we could create further opportunities for including students' free speech and versatile debate, to encounter the affective dimensions of 'conflict' (Sartre 2004, Matthews 2018c) and 'dissensus' (Rancière 2010).

As we build new interactive spaces, for example through digital technologies, we face the question of how to increase freedom of expression, equality of access, enjoyment of discovery and affective human presence. Perhaps we are still working with the beginnings of human capacity? Reflective educators continue to question their own and others' thinking, to develop more inclusive virtual and physical environments,

that acknowledge personal learning space and encourage understanding of cultural difference. With a method of relational freedom, I have made a case for a discursive philosophical interaction with creative practice, and for learning pathways as terrains of possibility that act across worlds of experience.

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