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Emancipating older learners: On the problems of naïve consciousness and the enlightened teacher

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Abstract

The tension between education and emancipation is a recurrent theme in educational philosophy but remains comparatively neglected in critical educational gerontology (CEG). CEG is a philosophical strand in older adult education aiming at the social emancipation of older learners. CEG links radical emancipation to the outcome of raising older learners' presumed naïve consciousness with the help of an enlightened teacher. In this essay, we argue that the logic of radical social emancipation features theoretical contradictions at its roots, which translate into empirical ambiguities when employed to raise older learners' consciousness. We address two problems: (1) older learners' naïve consciousness and (2) its subsequent dependence on teachers' critical consciousness. To solve these problems, we propose Jacques Rancière's logic of educational emancipation, focusing on the individual's capacity to learn by presuming intellectual equality as a pre-condition for learning rather than an outcome as with CEG. By treating this perspective in older adult education, we hope to emancipate CEG itself by refocusing its scope primarily on the educational realm.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, older learners, critical educational gerontology, emancipation, older adult education

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'It is not inequality that is the real evil, but dependence' (Voltaire, 2005, p. 51)

Introduction

The relationship between education and emancipation is fundamental to educational philosophy. Theoretical debates have highlighted the emancipatory potential of education, including that of independence, autonomy and liberation. Starting from analyses of the power relations innate to all pedagogical relationships, scholars have, however, questioned whether education and freedom can co-exist and stressed how education can reproduce dependence, infantilisation and oppression (Depaepe & Smeyers, 2008; Southwell & Depaepe, 2019).

In (older) adult education, emancipation from oppression remains a pursuit-worthy goal (Wildemeersch, 2014; Findsen, 2007). Despite broader theoretical discussions on the interplay between older adult education and emancipation (Formosa, 2011; Findsen, 2007; Glendenning & Battersby, 1990), questions can still be raised concerning the character of emancipation and the position of the teacher: (1) is the scope and character of the emancipation of older learners we strive for intended to be a collective and socially encompassing outcome or an individual classroom-bounded pre-condition for learning? (2) What role could the educator be assigned? Furthermore, and (3), how can this role be achieved without inflicting more stultification? Re-treating these research questions is precipitated by the recently revived debate over the relevance of critical educational gerontology (CEG), a philosophical strand in older adult education. This debate, in part, problematised CEG's traditional reliance on Freirean radical pedagogy, as well as its framing of older learners' consciousness and the role ascribed to teachers (Percy, 1990; Withnall, 2010; Hachem & Westberg, 2023).

In this paper, we examine and take aim at the relationship between CEG and radical emancipation in *five steps* in order to respond to the three questions raised earlier. Our epistemological position is anchored in a multi-disciplinary approach that enriches our arguments by drawing on educational philosophy, sociology, and community psychology. We first introduce our rationale for treating two key problems with CEG's current logic of radical social emancipation. Second, we present notable developments in CEG. Third, we flesh out CEG's logic of emancipation, tracing it back to its radical roots, followed by a summary of how it has been enacted in empirical interventions. In the fourth step, we analyse and underline several ambiguities and contradictions in CEG's theory and practice. The fifth and last step consists of proposing Jacque Rancière's (1991) logic of intellectual emancipation as a way to overcome said ambiguities.

By taking these five steps, this article is, first and foremost, a long-due response to CEG's coupling to Freirean (1972) radical emancipation. Furthermore, it fuels the fascinating debate on the learning philosophies in older age via Rancière's perspective on intellectual emancipation as a pre-condition for teaching older people. We begin with presenting the paper's rationale for treating two problems.

Step 1: A rationale for treating two problems

The CEG is a learning philosophy that answers central questions on the teaching and learning of older people. It embeds a radical classical emancipatory agenda, and its scope covers collectivities at the level of society at large. CEG adopts Paulo Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy, enunciated in the celebrated *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. CEG was initially conceived to counter 'false' emancipatory education for older people by redressing philosophically designed learning opportunities. CEG is intended to promote

the emancipation of older learners by stressing 'their collective capacity to empower themselves' (Findsen, 2007, p. 553) and designates a critical teacher to actualise this goal (Formosa, 2002, 2011).

CEG starts from the belief that older people are oppressed to weave its emancipatory logic (Formosa, 2011). Their oppression not only manifests itself in age-based discriminatory policies and limiting social structures but also via the internalisation of self-defeating and crippling ageist discourses, which prevent them from identifying the effects of ageism on their lives. Thus, CEG strives to 'unsettle the complacency that older people feel about social conditions' (Glendenning & Battersby, 1990, p. 228) so that they become the subjects of their lives and develop the capabilities to decode the workings of power on their realities. This is paramount to CEG, in light of what the predicament of ideology entails: 'It is precisely because of the way in which power works upon our consciousness that we are unable to see how power works on our consciousness' (Biesta, 2017, p. 55). Here, CEG stresses a unique role for teachers, premised on a striking difference in consciousness levels between them and older learners. The enlightened teacher, an organic intellectual in Gramsci's (1971) terms, is given the responsibility to raise older learners' consciousness in order for them to decode the workings of power on their social realities and lead them on the path of 'analysing, resisting and challenging structures of power' (Inglis, 1997, p. 4), denoted hereafter as *social emancipation*.

Meanwhile, to raise older learners' consciousness, their teacher must aforehand be emancipated (Freire, 1972). An emancipated teacher has the competence, talent and intelligence to analyse realities and see beyond ideology and power structures. Ultimately, under the patronage of CEG, revolutionary capacities, possessed initially by the teacher and eventually endowed in the learners, are summarised as critical reflection and action (Formosa, 2011). Together, they form a praxis or a path to radical social emancipation in its classical understanding (Laclau, 2007). If this path is incomplete, it results in/from *verbalism* (critical reflection without action) or *activism* (action without critical reflection) (Freire, 1972).

Despite wide reception, CEG's radical emancipatory logic provoked several critiques and fuelled debates over the relevance of and mechanisms of emancipation with older learners (see Percy, 1990; Withnall, 2010; Hachem, 2023; Hachem & Westberg, 2023). We condense these into two main problems, which we aim to treat in this paper. Problem one is that CEG risks painting an ambiguous and reductive picture of older learners' consciousness and intelligence, allowing unequal relationships between ever so more intelligent teachers and ideologically confused older learners until they prove otherwise to the critical teachers; only then could a dialogue of equals start (see Biesta 2017). However, until that point, radical social emancipation may remain a preliminary promise to a future-oriented goal. Problem two emerges from this future-oriented nature of emancipation, which automatically sustains a difference in consciousness and extends older learners' dependence on their teachers' critical consciousness. This is evidenced in empirical works showing that this promise of social emancipation is difficult, if ever possible, to realise, often ending with what Freire would label with verbalisms. Consequently, extended contact with critical teachers (e.g., Formosa, 2012; Formosa & Galea, 2020; Nye, 1998) is called for.

Given the above, we caution that CEG's radical emancipatory logic may hide an underlying admission to some inequalities characterising older learners. Politics, Cerletti (2005) argues, cannot start from inequality and annul it via corrective measures, be they educational or political, to render equal the unequal: 'he[she] who parts from inequality, believing in it, will admit it' (p. 86, translated from French by the authors). Instead, the existence of inferior actors, including those allegedly with inferior consciousness, should

be renounced starting in the ‘classroom’. CEG’s current logic leaves room for raising three research questions which will guide our paper: (1) is the scope and character of the emancipation of older learners we strive for intended to be a collective and socially encompassing outcome or an individual classroom-bounded pre-condition for learning? (2) What role could the educator be assigned? Furthermore, (3) how can this role be achieved without inflicting more stultification?

To answer these questions, we are inspired by Danny Wildemeersch’s pioneering works (2014, 2019, 2020) in revisiting what emancipation is good for in adult education. These works guide our understanding and treatment of Jacques Rancière’s (1991) postmodern logic of *educational emancipation* in the celebrated *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Meanwhile, Rancière’s assumption of the equality of intelligence is the pillar for our overarching argument that CEG’s radical social emancipation no longer adequately serves the emancipation of older people despite its laudable results in teaching them about and raising their awareness on socio-political issues. Next, we present a brief but telling history of CEG.

Step 2: Summary of CEG developments

The goal of emancipating older learners has roots dating back to the early 1980s. The 1980s witnessed the birth of a critical social gerontological movement in the United Kingdom (UK), the first to engage critically with ‘apocalyptic constructions of ageing’ (Doheny & Jones, 2021, p. 2325). This movement later enthused the rise of a radical emancipatory agenda for educating older people, baptised CEG, which promulgates a Freirean critical pedagogy to counter social inequality, oppression, sexism, ageism and racism via educational interventions. CEG received foundational contributions from the UK’s Chris Philipson and Frank Glendenning and later witnessed significant developments by scholars in Australia, New Zealand, Malta, and beyond (see Table 1).

Table 1. The main features of CEG. Source: Adapted from Hachem (2023)

Feature	CEG in the works of Battersby, Glendenning and Findsen	CEG in the works of Formosa
Academic worldview	Critical social theory (Marxism) and critical pedagogy (Paolo Freire)	Critical social theory (Pierre Bourdieu) and critical pedagogy (Paolo Freire)
Older learners	Are powerless, oppressed and naïve	Are oppressed and possess differential power levels
Motives for learning	Class struggles and false consciousness	Class struggles and habitus
Educational goal	Empowerment and emancipation	Empowerment and emancipation
Teacher’s role	Liberator	Educator/leader

In 1990, Glendenning and Battersby officially dubbed the theory and praxis of critical older adult education as CEG. First, they rejected a functionalist approach to educating older people, which viewed them as a social problem. Instead, they argued for a political

economy framework for educational gerontology, which examines society's treatment of older people based on their social status and resources. Second, they demanded that CEG serve older adults' interests while arguing that their education cannot be conceived as a miraculous cure for the lack of critical reflection but rather as an ideological approach to the theory and practice of moral education. Third, CEG aims to transform society. Glendenning and Battersby enriched CEG with concepts like empowerment, emancipation, transformation, social and hegemonic control, and conscientisation. Thus, educating older people cannot be practised without addressing these concepts since 'neutral' education is, by default, domesticating. Finally, in countering banking education, the fourth principle highlighted that CEG is dialogic, predicated on the notion of praxis, and fosters a dialectal relationship between theory and practice.

Later, Battersby and Glendenning (1992) elaborated their rationale for endorsing CEG in their initial statement in four points. First, they insisted that education is not necessarily self-evidently good. Second, they claimed that older adults are treated as a homogenous group even though they are not. Third, they argued that geropsychology research on older learners needs to be problematised. Fourth, the field of educational gerontology had, until then, lacked clear philosophical foundations. Additionally, Battersby and Glendenning highlighted the dire situation older adults endure; they asserted that they are oppressed. That is so because they are victims of many inequalities related to social class and age. Meanwhile, they warned that older people are unaware of this oppression. Thus, their education must strive to liberate them. To that end, the teachers' role is to enact Freire's critical pedagogy and apply his praxis of critical reflection and action, leading to their social empowerment and emancipation. Aligning with these ideals, Brian Findsen (2002, 2007) was enthusiastic about Freirean pedagogy and promoted its adoption in older adult education. Even if Findsen (2002) saw that a humanist approach to older adult education is virtuous, he insisted that the socio-political realities of older people deserve a more radical engagement. This engagement, he argued, is possible via a tight coupling of CEG to the teachings of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Findsen, 2007).

Apart from Findsen's endorsement of CEG, the movement had already grown wider with Marvin Formosa's 'critical geragogy'. Formosa (2002) developed critical geragogy as an alternative to Malcolm Knowles' (1984) andragogy. It was meant to convey Freire's notion of praxis and be the practical translation of CEG. The guiding tenets of critical geragogy are: (1) fighting ageist structures (2) by mobilising collectivities and recognising individual learning needs; (3) not any education is empowering to older adults; (4) teachers are not only facilitators but rather leaders who are committed to their sufferings; (5) hence the need for extending education to distinct segments of older adults, not only older learners, while resorting to (6) a self-help culture that is (7) counter-hegemonic, an agent of social change.

While Formosa (2011) revised the vision of CEG, he remained loyal to a critical agenda for later life learning, citing its continued relevance. Referring to Erich Fromm (1979), Formosa noted that even the inner drives of humans under capitalism are only culturally embedded forms of domination serving the current status quo. Despite that, he added that CEG principles have to be more modern since 'Marxism has gone out of fashion' (Formosa, 2011, p. 324), and human agency's record levels have led to the fading of some social inequalities under neo-liberalism. Formosa problematised 'zero-sum' power relations, favouring instead Bourdieusian notions of power in terms of differences in capital through which social inequalities manifest (Formosa, 2006). Hence, Formosa (2011) (re)endorsed the Freirean pedagogical tradition as a countermeasure to banking education and destined CEG to provide a transformative rationale which uncovers and

mitigates social inequalities. He stressed that the latter requires the help of 'educators' who are knowledgeable, competent, and capable of guiding their students towards higher levels of critical consciousness. Furthermore, Formosa called on CEG to promote listening, love, and tolerance to increase solidarity and fruitful dialogue among learners. Finally, he defended the relevance of a revolutionary praxis in founding age-related social movements and forging alliances between groups of like-minded older people. Formosa's renewal of CEG was echoed favourably in the field and became the go-to approach to enacting critical pedagogy with older people. The nature of this enactment is clarified next.

Step 3. CEG's emancipation in theory and practice

Emancipation, or liberation, can have various meanings. Community psychology, for example, defines emancipation as

> […] a process entailing a social rupture in the sense of transforming both the conditions of inequality and oppression and the institutions and practices producing them. It has a collective nature, but its effects also transform the individuals participating, who, while carrying out material changes, are empowered and develop new forms of social identity. It is also a political process in the sense that its point of departure is the conscientization of the participants, who become aware of their rights and duties within their society, developing their citizenship and critical capacities, while strengthening democracy and civil society. (Montero & Sonn, 2009, p. 1)

In adult education, radical emancipation often refers to 'analysing, resisting and challenging structures of power' (Inglis, 1997, p. 4). It entails overturning oppressive structures (Inglis, 1997) via a radical form of social mobilisation (von Kotze et al., 2016), leading to but also resulting from raising the consciousness of the oppressed. Oppression is, then, the unjust exercise of power and the control of ideas and resources to produce and sustain social inequality (Watts et al., 1996) and alienation from the authentic condition of human beings (Freire, 1972). Oppression is not confined to political, social, and economic natures but is also psychological; see Table 2 comparing three major definitions of emancipation and oppression.

Table 2. Comparing logics of emancipation. Source: Adapted from Biesta (2017)

	Modern logic of emancipation (banking education)	**Freirean logic of social emancipation**	**Rancière's logic of educational emancipation**
Oppression	Material and discursive power imbalance and ideology.	Alienation from the authentic condition of human beings.	The belief that one cannot learn, think, and act for oneself. An act of rejection of one's freedom.
Enacting emancipation	Providing learners with the truth about their objective condition.	Shared inquiry between teachers and learners involved in action and reflection.	Revealing an intelligence to itself.
Focus	Teacher-centred.	Learner-centred.	Thing-centred.

According to Montero (2009), liberation from oppression is a matter of willingness, knowing and doing. Since consciousness-raising is crucial to emancipation, the latter would not be complete without the mobilisation of consciousness and the production of historical knowledge about oneself and the world. Freire (1972) defines critical consciousness as the antidote to oppression and the perception of social, political, and economic contradictions (critical reflection) and a behavioural stance against oppressive realities (critical action). Diemer et al. (2017) add to Freire's praxis a third component, critical motivation, to define individuals' agency and commitment to addressing perceived injustice.

Via six abstract dimensions, a philosophical conceptualisation of radical emancipation is brought to us by (Laclau, 2007). The first dimension is *dichotomic,* requiring an absolute rift and discontinuity between the (educational) intervention and what succeeds it on the one hand and the pre-emancipatory order on the other. The second dimension is *holistic;* here, emancipation concerns all areas of social life since they are interconnected (cf. Diemer et al., 2017). The third dimension is *transparency*, meaning overcoming alienation and achieving emancipation leaves no space for power or representation. The fourth dimension is the indispensability of *pre-existence* of what ought to be emancipated, 'there is no emancipation without oppression, and there is no oppression without the presence of something impeded in its free development by oppressive forces' (p. 1). Laclau proposes a fifth dimension, which he calls *ground.* He contends that any true radical emancipation must leave behind everything preceding it. Hence, emancipation is not radical if the revolutionary act leaves a non-transformable residue. The final and sixth dimension is *rationalistic,* implying that complete emancipation occurs when the social real ceases to be opaque, and its distance from the rational is eliminated – suggesting an awakening is required.

Rationality that is induced by awakening is fundamental for radical emancipation. Clarifying [ir]rationality, therefore, is of interest to this paper. Erich Fromm (1979) speaks of an objective reality that stands beyond our senses and hinders one's awakening; 'most people are half-awake, half-dreaming […] what they hold to be true and self-evident is illusion produced by the suggestive influence of the social world in which they live' (p. 47). According to Fromm, a competent and rational authority is necessary for an awakening; perhaps, as a teacher-leader, akin to an 'organic intellectual' (Gramsci, 1971). This authority's rationality would be based on competence, and 'it helps the person who leans on it to grow' (Fromm, 1979, p. 45). For increased rationality, knowledge in the mode of being is needed. Knowledge in the mode of *being* liberates people 'from holding on to things and of one's ego' (p. 69). In contrast, knowledge in the mode of having is akin to 'banking education' fervently rejected by Freire (1972) for oppressing people and numbing their consciousness.

In order to grasp the relationship between education and radical emancipation in CEG, the term banking education is key. Banking education is a kind of education that focuses on teaching 'facts' rather than promoting a critical and reflective mindset. In that respect, banking education suffers from three undesirable traits CEG rejects: (1) the teacher teaches, the students are taught; (2) the teacher knows everything, while learners know nothing; and (3) the teacher solely designs educational activities, and learners adapt to them. Banking education uses knowledge to indoctrinate learners rather than to free them: 'More and more, the oppressors are using science and technology as unquestionably powerful instruments for their purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order through manipulation and repression' (Freire, 1972, p. 36). Banking education promotes educational content that remains detached from learners' realities and describes all but their life world, as in knowledge in the mode of having. It works to advance certain

slogans and empty messages to occupy the consciousness of learners and distract them from using it to confront their realities as situated beings in and with the world.

In banking education, teachers are the opposites of learners; they are necessary for remedying learners' ignorance, which justifies the need for their existence. Seeing its anti-dialogical nature, banking education ensures that content is defined only by the teacher's desire to preach to his/her learners, where such 'content is in the form of… bits of information to be deposited in the students' (Freire, 1972, p. 66). To move beyond banking education, which is teacher-centred, Freire (1972) suggests a learner-centred problem-posing type of education to raise learners' consciousness via a horizontal relationship between teachers and learners, leading to a dialogue of equals. Starting from this equality, dialogue as a teaching/learning method provides the space for the encounter of '[wo]men mediated by the world in order to name the world' (Freire, 1972, p. 61) and act on/in it.

Radical emancipation in practice

Several action research with older learners describe attempting to raise their consciousness by following CEG's logic of radical emancipation. These are essentially distinct from an even larger body of literature dedicated to 'empowering' older learners from within power structures (or social mobility, see Inglis, 1997). For example, Nye (1998) used 'liberation writing' to engage older learners with their social realities. She reported that learners developed trust and comfort with one another, reached deep into their creative side and experienced 'individual empowerment.' Nye's call for social action in this group was missed, which she justified with a lack of attractiveness of political engagement to older people. She argued that they are more interested in social connectedness and concluded that 'it could be dangerous to impose a paradigm of compulsory revolution on seniors' (p. 113). Nye noted it was difficult for learners to identify as oppressed since older learners might have acted as both oppressors and oppressed throughout their (working) lives, which explains the scarcity of common issues worth fighting for.

Intending to raise their consciousness on social issues related to womanhood, elder abuse and self-neglect, Formosa (2005) designed a CEG-based educational intervention with a group of older women in Malta. He concluded that the 'practice of critical geragogy succeeded in making them [learners] more aware of the hegemonic nature of "normal" learning in older adult education' (p. 402). However, some participants expressed concerns over being 'othered' by the teacher due to an overemphasis on their gender, but also by being designated as oppressed. In another study, Formosa (2012) sensitised his study participants to age-friendly projects at the local municipal level. Although participants demonstrated critical reflection by laying out an inclusive, age-friendly plan for policy advocacy, to the author's disappointment, the path from critical reflection to critical action was incomplete. Formosa grounded the reluctance of his learners' to 'act' (i.e. submitting their proposal to the local council) in their conservative nature and their hesitancy to 'rock the boat' (p. 48); that is, to bring about change.

Formosa and Galea (2020) faced similar results. Their action research explored the possibilities and limitations of critical consciousness with 12 older adults. This time, participants selected generative study themes such as transport, communication, and Tai Chi. The authors opted for an 'egalitarian' position with the learners, offering non-directive support when needed. They reported that, with the help of CEG, older participants developed a deeper understanding of inequalities concerning life chances, and they questioned and analysed the dominant status quo and the embedding of power

dynamics within normative ways of living. However, the authors noted that ‘no ability or potency to act upon structural constraints was perceived at the end of the learning program’ (p. 67). Eventually, they justified the limitations of critical consciousness with immanence and self-limiting narratives, internal ageism, and political activism as a narrative identity that reflects a lifetime commitment to progressive action rather than a competence to be developed overnight. These realisations prompted the authors to determine, ‘It is naïve to expect older learners to continue engaging in critical consciousness without any leadership whatsoever in their future lives, and some form of continuation meetings are warranted’ (p. 69).

The same incomplete radical emancipation is again reported in Brown’s (2020) workshops with active older citizens. Following a Freirean community-based approach to teaching older adults, the author reported that her poetry-based methodology led to some form of emancipation. She testified that her participants engaged in planning for the future when they wrote ‘proposals for possible avenues for praxis’, but they also benefited in terms of ‘increased networking, pursuit of independent leads and engagement with broader society’ (p. 27). According to Brown, these are obvious signs of critical reflection. However, she also mentioned that immanence explained their reluctance to actualise plans for social action. She added that participants’ engagement in the project witnessed fluctuations between domestication and emancipation. These studies imply that although CEG-based interventions result in beneficial outcomes, especially at the critical reflection level, it is challenging to lead older learners to engage in critical action. That is to say, radical emancipation, as CEG conceives it, is hardly ever complete. We discuss this claim in the following step.

Step 4. Taking stock of CEG’s radical social emancipation

Several ambiguities and contractions mark CEG’s theory and practice. We focus on two gaps: The first concerns the initial unequal rapport between two levels of consciousness, where the teachers are positioned as critical and older learners as naïve. The second concerns the prolonged dependence of learners’ consciousness on their teachers’.

The unequal relationship between the critical teacher and the naïve learner implies that CEG’s radical logic of social emancipation faces contradictions inherent to radical emancipation itself, casting doubts on the feasibility of this educational goal. Laclau (2007) argues that the dimensions of radical emancipation presented above endure at least two contradictions: the first is between the *dichotomic* dimension and that of the *ground*. A truly radical emancipation requires that the oppressor has no neutral role towards the oppressed and that the mutual otherness involving oppressors and oppressed can never be reduced. The two parties are essentially antagonistic and use discourses having no common measure. Consequently, the emancipatory moment is never objectively described, meaning there can never be a common ground for objectively explaining the pre- and post-emancipatory orders, especially in terms of how rational these orders are. A second contradiction involves the *ground* and *rationalistic* dimensions. The latter dimension presupposes that the events leading up to emancipation are irrational, and whatever newly formed social order would be entirely rational. According to Laclau, this implication also tarnishes the rationality of the emancipatory act with power relations if the *ground* dimension is satisfied, implying that the new and emancipated social reality is equally irrational and contingent on power relations. Suppose common ground is found; emancipation is no longer radical or dichotomic; the pre- and post-emancipatory orders are therefore equally irrational. Thus, an endemic contradiction around the *dichotomic*

dimension of CEG's radical emancipation presents itself. If CEG's emancipation does not entail a chasm, it is not radical, which denies its radical essence.

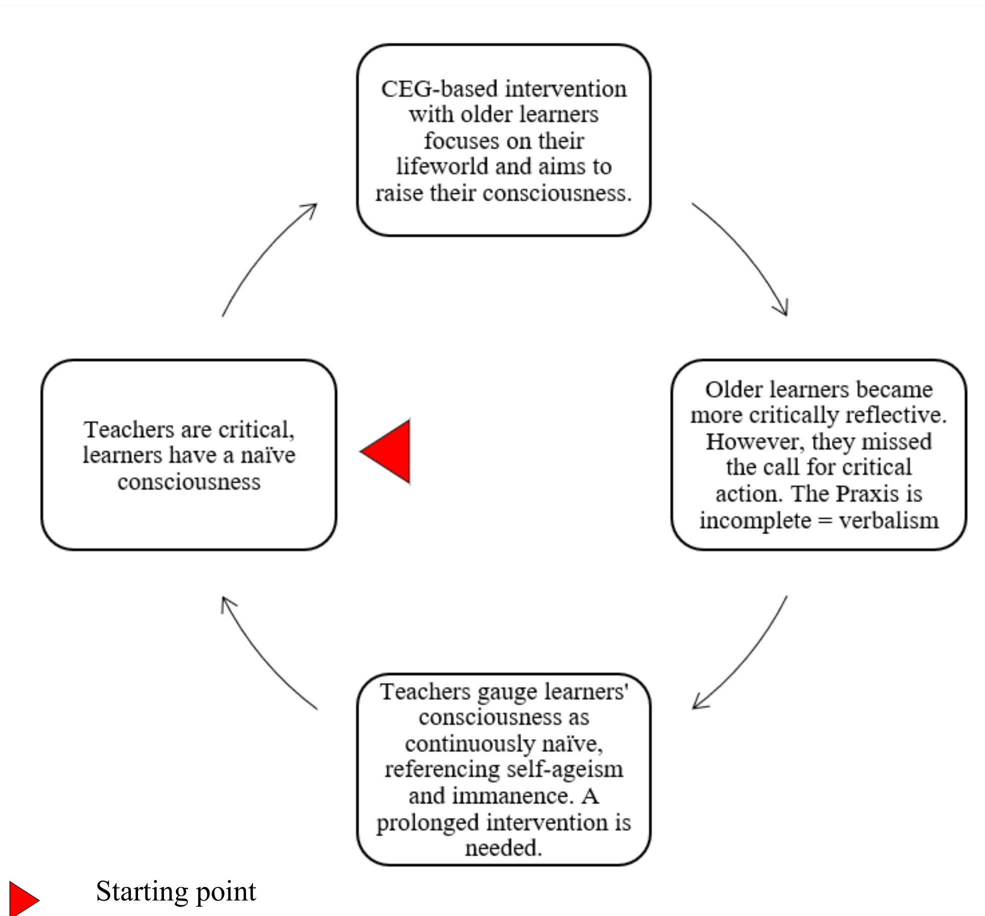
CEG's supposedly horizontal dialogue of equals between teachers and older learners also leads to a third contradiction. Based on the distrust in the experiences of the to-be emancipated older learners since they are unaware of the predicament of ideology, a role for a more competent and rational consciousness is warranted (see Formosa 2002, 2011; Findsen, 2007). The mere requirement for this higher consciousness threatens the authenticity of the Freirean horizontal dialogue, and here is how. The critical teacher is to lead the dialogue of equals towards an objective and rational conclusion – they are oppressed – hitherto inaccessible to older learners. This conclusion is itself necessary for (1) the teacher to enact their role, to emancipate, given the dimension of *pre-existence*, and (2) an incomplete conscientisation process (reflection and action) calls for an extension of the teachers' role and consequently learners' dependence on their superior consciousness. Thus, until older learners admit to their oppression and become aware of its underlying mechanisms and willing to overturn them (Biesta, 2017), the teacher cannot, in reality, adhere to a dialogue of equals, risking instead, slipping into a Socratic instruction with a pre-determined conclusion and the ushering of learners to it.

What if they do not (want to) reach that conclusion? Then, a fourth contradiction emerges. While CEG is an anti-hegemonic institution, it risks promoting a hegemony of its own doing. Percy (1990) raises this concern as he disbelieves in teachers' radical emancipatory role. He objects: 'It would be theoretically possible to be fully aware of one's lack of social power but quite able to pursue self-actualisation as a goal' (p. 236), leaving no room for an educational intervention to counter a separate 'objective' oppressive reality. For example, crisis-ridden older learners who nevertheless seek enjoyment and personal growth (see Kulmus, 2021). Percy casts even more doubts over the extent and scope of teachers' role in CEG, questioning: 'how afar the influence of an educator runs in helping older adults to gain power over their own lives' (p. 234) and whether older learners can opt to remain complacent if they wish to? CEG has not thoroughly addressed these questions yet, which may imply that radical emancipation's societal and collective scope needs reconsideration, not least given CEG's empirical track record.

Empirical interventions are telltale of the ease with which the emancipatory role of a critical teacher, as described by CEG, reveals stultifying elements instead, thus illustrating a fifth contradiction. Here, we argue that these interventions unwillingly entrap older learners into a cycle of naïve consciousness, prolonging dependency on the teacher's higher consciousness (see Figure 1). Having been carried from theory to the empirical realm, CEG-based interventions reported mildly disappointing results, indicating that older learners, subject to a Freirean educational intervention, may have exercised critical reflection but have resisted engaging in critical action, i.e. stopped at verbalisms (e.g., Brown, 2020; Formosa, 2005, 2012; Formosa & Galea, 2020; Nye, 1998). The authors justify the reluctance of older learners to liberate themselves (with action) from oppression with the tenacity of learners' internalised oppression, which reveals a tautology explaining a false consciousness with no other but an uncritical consciousness. How can this emancipation be radical, then, when: (1) the *ground* dimension is satisfied since it is impossible to separate the oppressed from the oppressors (see Nye, 1998), who continue moving on a spectrum of oppression and emancipation (Brown, 2020), (2) the *rationalistic* and *transparency* dimensions are not satisfied since critical action was not undertaken (see Formosa, 2005, 2012), older learners continuously exhibit immanence (see Formosa & Galea, 2020), and risk being othered based on sectional representation (Formosa, 2005)? It is safe to conclude that emancipation was

not radical in these cases but instead opened the door for an extended dependence of learners' consciousness on their teachers', seemingly, until further notice.

Figure 1. A tautology of naïve consciousness. Source: Authors' own figure



We highlight a sixth and final contradiction concerning the *holistic* dimension, or domain specificity of CEG's radical emancipation. CEG strives to counter all the -isms from an age-related departure point. Formosa (2005) provides insights into how challenging and even counterproductive it can be to satisfy the *holistic* dimension of radical emancipation, not least since other scholars also argue for its domain specificity (see Diemer et al., 2017). For example, Formosa (2005) regrets that he 'othered' his older female students when he approached them from a tight sectional gender perspective. He reckons his position as a younger male, trying to liberate older women but risking by convincing them they are oppressed, partially disempowering them in the process.

Let us suppose teachers' consciousness is not holistic since even gerontologists could perpetuate ageism and may exhibit self-ageism (Morrow-Howell et al., 2023). How can this domain-specific consciousness allow teachers to grasp (inter)sectional perspectives they have not even experienced better than their learners? Even more so to lead them on paths towards 'objective' realities they have not walked either? Competent experts, too, are confused and anxious and face increasing difficulties in leading people to emancipatory solutions and truths.[1] Then how could one known outcome exist when 'many important challenges remain unaddressed or unresolved because of the technical, political, cultural and educational complexities' (Wildemeersch, 2014, p. 825; Baggini, 2018)? Wildemeersch (2019) argues that it is not expert knowledge that is needed but rather a commitment to a democratic public pedagogy, in which teachers and learners

'engage in a process of co-investigation… without having a clear answer of what the outcome of the process will be' (p. 178); this 'ignorance' is primordial for an authentic dialogue of equals. To achieve it, the problems of learners' consciousness and the need for teachers' intelligence to hoist the first should be addressed. Hence, this last fifth step crowns our revisit of one of the 'old masters' (Freire) notions of radical social emancipation as we ponder its suitability (Wildemeersch, 2020) in and for emancipatory older adult education.

Step 5. Rancière's intellectual (but radical) emancipation

In order to overcome the tensions that mark CEG's emancipatory logic, we suggest that CEG instead embraces an alternative logic of *educational* emancipation rather than the *social* emancipation that CEG has so far promoted. This alternative logic emerges from 'universal teaching' by French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1991), who articulated his philosophy in the chef d'oeuvre *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons on Intellectual Emancipation*.

Our understanding of this educational emancipation logic is based on Rancière's story of the 'intellectual adventure' of Joseph Jacotot, a lecturer in French literature at the University of Louvain, in 1818. Jacotot's adventure, on which the book is based, entailed teaching French to students who could only speak Flemish, a language Jacotot ignored. Using a bilingual (French and Flemish) version of the book *Le Télémaque,* Jacotot, hereafter, the ignorant teacher, via a translator, asked his students to learn the French text by relying on the Flemish version and repeating what they learned several times until they could recite the text in French. To the ignorant teacher's surprise, the students had learned French without explication (explanation) from him. 'What has happened once is thenceforth always possible' claimed Rancière (1991, p. 11), arguing that the system built around explication promotes intellectual oppression. 'Explication is not necessary to remedy an incapacity to understand' (p. 6); instead, the teacher needs the incapable learner to justify their role. For Rancière, they should not explicate to nor usher learners towards an objective reality (in a book or society at large). Thus, CEG's requirement for the teacher to have a higher consciousness is rejected on this ground.

Explication is oppressive since explaining something to someone is to convince them they cannot understand it by themselves (Rancière, 1991). Explication also means announcing to older learners that learning begins now and the teacher is there to mitigate their ignorance – a role the CEG teacher is willing to extend until further notice. This drive towards illuminating learners' ignorance of their objective social realities stems not from ill intent to foreground teachers' power in the social order, at least not in CEG. Instead, teacher-explicators are knowledgeable, enlightened and indeed of good faith. However, the more knowledgeable they are, 'the more evident to [them] is the distance between their knowledge and the ignorance of the ignorant ones' (p. 7). While CEG does not encourage explication per se, it premises its emancipatory logic entirely on learners' inability to decode 'objective' power relations governing their social realities without a teacher's critical consciousness. As argued earlier, CEG's supposed dialogue of equals is more akin to a Socratic type of teaching: 'There is a Socrates sleeping in every explicator' (p. 29). For Rancière, contrary to the Socratic method, the teachers' and learners' orbits of truth should ideally remain separate. Therefore, it is unreasonable to premise CEG's dialogue of equals on a difference in consciousness.

If the need for teachers is unfounded on a difference in consciousness or intelligence, what could it be based on then? With Rancière, we can assume all people, including older learners and their teachers, are equally intelligent, which tactfully addresses this essay's

first problem of learners' naïve consciousness. Instead, Rancière (1991) theorises a difference in 'will.' Teachers and learners may still differ in how strong their will to learn and to mobilise their intelligence is; in other words, how much attention they are willing to invest in learning. This impacts the teacher-learner relationship, manifesting in a shift from dependence of learners' consciousness on their teachers', to a dependence on teachers' will. Since the degree of consciousness is hard to evaluate, will, attention, and the commitment to learn are more readily verifiable. Therefore, the role of the teacher is to verify the will, attention, and efforts invested in learning, not the level of consciousness, thus addressing the second problem in this essay by evading the possibility of prolonged dependence on teachers' consciousness. According to Rancière (1991), any account by a teacher evaluating a learner's intelligence/consciousness must show factual causality. Otherwise, it reduces itself to a tautology 'in the way the *virtus dormitiva* explains the effects of opium' (italicised in the original text, p. 49). We have shown earlier how empirical applications of CEG resulted in a similar tautology with CEG teachers explaining older learners' naïve consciousness at the end of their intervention with immanence and internal ageism (see Figure 1). In this case, factual causality remains unestablished since the cause and the symptom are one.

Henceforth, we, like Rancière (1991), invite the readers to assume that teachers and learners are equally intelligent and enjoy the same level of consciousness since proving the opposite is almost impossible; they instead have differential will. Under the assumption of equality of intelligence or consciousness, the teacher would need to be/act like an 'ignorant teacher' since, otherwise, it is impossible to pre-determine an 'objective' emancipatory truth and lead learners to it (Wildemeersch, 2019), for it may not exist to start with. In this case, the so-called ignorant teacher is at an equal distance with older learners vis-à-vis the object of study, which we now call a 'thing'. This thing can be a reality embedded in a book, a symphony, a painting, or a MOOC.[2] So, what tasks could this ignorant teacher be assigned, and can they be achieved without further stultification?

Instead of verifying consciousness, an ignorant teacher uses the following provocations to verify learners' will to learn a thing: 'What one sees in it, what one thinks about it, what one makes of it' (Rancière, 1991, pp. 20-21). This ignorant teacher does not know what or how learners will answer these provocations, unlike CEG teachers who insist learners are oppressed and unaware of it, despite what learners actually think. Instead, the truth is in the object of study, the thing. Rancière (1991) compares the thing to an island, as all that's needed is there. It is a totality to which 'one can attach everything new one learns' (p. 20). It is then up to learners to discover this reality and make sense of it, all while operating under the will of the ignorant teacher, who verifies if learners invested efforts to decode the truth. But how come the 'thing' is the centre of learning rather than the learners, as with CEG? That is because, unlike with CEG, it does not matter *who* is learning since everyone can learn without explication. So long the thing is coded by an equal intelligence, assuming equality of intelligence, it can be decoded and recoded by the same intelligence without requiring another, certainly not the teachers', but it does require attention, effort and repetition. That is why teacher emancipators, or ignorant teachers, according to Rancière, mobilise learners' will to reveal their intelligence to itself, already as a pre-condition for the learning process, rather than a future-oriented goal; that is, *intellectual* emancipation, the belief that one can learn, think, and act for oneself, and accepting one's freedom. If that is so, which scope and character best describe this intellectual emancipation?

In contrast to CEG's logic of social emancipation, intellectual emancipation begins right at the start of the learning opportunity, and reasonably, the ignorant teacher's role ends with it. This emancipation is radical, individual and loses significance on a collective

level: ‘man[or women] is a will served by intelligence’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 55), which is indivisible and without community, meaning it cannot belong to a group, e.g. a group of older people. For CEG, social emancipation is collective and manifests in collectivities; for Rancière, if intelligence belongs to the union of people, it no longer belongs to the individual. Since the emancipation of learners is intellectual and restricted primarily to the educational context, their oppression is similar in scope. The well-described dispositional barriers to learning in older age epitomise this lifelong educational oppression. Rancière noted, ‘what stultifies common people is not the lack of instruction, but their belief in the inferiority of their intelligence’ (p. 39). It is the ‘I can’t’ that stops older learners and others from emancipation. This ‘I can’t’ is no other than pure laziness of the mind, a vice expressed upon one losing their path and forgetting who they are. Nevertheless, in this ‘I can’t’, which CEG often dismisses as naïve consciousness, Rancière finds hope. For him, this term means ‘I don’t want to; why would I make the effort?’ (p. 40) which also carries in it: I could, for I am intelligent.

Finally, intellectual emancipation is also radical. Compared to CEG, it fits that description better since it satisfies at least the *dichotomic* and *transparency* dimensions of radical emancipation (see Laclau, 2007). A chasm is actualised by assuming equality of intelligence or consciousness, breaking with taken-for-granted assumptions that teachers are more critical or intelligent than their naïve learners and that learning in older age is too late, difficult, or impossible. As for power, with intellectual emancipation, pedagogy is thing-centred and leaves no room for representation since one and all are equal in intelligence and stand at an equal distance to the object of study; a universal equality worthy of all.

Concluding remarks

In this essay, we followed five steps in order to identify, grapple with and solve two key problems in CEG’s logic of radical social emancipation: (1) older learners’ naïve consciousness and (2) its dependence on their teachers’. CEG has long been coupled with Freirean pedagogy, and despite its commendable achievements, radical emancipation was not one of them. Here, we reiterate that CEG is a praiseworthy philosophical framework for teaching older people and enticing them to decode their social realities. However, we have demonstrated that in theory and practice, CEG’s goal of radical social emancipation fails to measure up to its own mandate.

This paper presents an additional logic of emancipation for CEG scholars to consider and engage with. We suggested Rancière’s logic of intellectual emancipation as a suitable alternative since it addresses several of CEG’s lacunae. Theorising CEG, from the departure point of educational emancipation, means (1) that the scope of emancipation is restricted, primarily, to the educational context rather than the wider society; (2) that the role of ‘ignorant teachers’ calls on them to verify will, attention and efforts rather than learners’ consciousness levels; and (3) that this role can be achieved without further stultification by assuming equality of consciousness between teachers and older learners as a pillar for teacher-student relationships.

Apart from emancipating older learners, this paper additionally emancipates CEG. First, CEG can be set free from the functional nature of its goal (overturning wider societal structures), which extends beyond the classroom walls – a goal function CEG initially set to break away from (see Glendenning & Battersby, 1990). Second, CEG teachers are exonerated from an impossible saviour role outside the classroom. Many logics of emancipation should indeed exist, which ‘opens the way to an endless interaction between various perspectives and makes ever more distant the possibility of

any totalitarian dream' (Laclau, 2007, p. 17). While enthusiasm towards Rancière's logic is warranted, we are reminded of Galloway's (2012) sobering proviso that 'neither Freire's nor Rancière's emancipatory education can be systematized' (p. 181), but systematisation is not necessarily the goal. Older adult education drives primarily nonformal and informal learning opportunities, which afford more significant potential for enacting Rancière's intellectual emancipation. Our final plea, therefore, invites scholars of older adult education to engage with this logic theoretically and empirically. We regret that word limits in this paper hindered us from (1) engaging with the broader political theory of Jacques Rancière, limiting our mobilisation of his philosophy to the educational realm and (2) elaborating on possible affinities and challenges when cross-fertilising intellectual emancipation and CEG. Consequently, these are two obvious future steps.

Notes

1 See Baggini's (2018) treatment of post-truth(s).
2 MOOCs are massive open online courses which can be studied individually.

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