

The Pedagogy of the Student: Reclaiming Agency in Receptive Subject-Positions

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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, when derived from Freireian origins, provides a particularly insightful critique about the way that capitalist oppressors dehumanize the oppressed by objectifying them and considering them merely in terms of money, numbers, and similar abstractions. In Freire's schema, the oppressed come to accept that they are "less than human," and in the process become more like objects to be manipulated by the capitalist class rather than human subjects with agency. These humans-as-objects are then rendered incapable of understanding or transforming their life situation. The goal of practitioners of critical pedagogy, therefore, is to give the oppressed the tools to reverse the dehumanization.

Paulo Freire's classic book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was originally published in 1968, and remains the seminal work for teachers seeking to move away from merely treating students like objects. Instead of the banking model, wherein the teacher deposits information into passive, submissive receptacles of knowledge, Freire proposed a more egalitarian model in which the students partner with their teacher in order to understand and transform their reality. Rather than simply helping his students acquire literacy skills, Freire enabled them to regain their humanity through critical literacy, to become subjects instead of objects, and to challenge the dehumanization wrought upon them by capitalism.

I have found this concept of students participating actively and critically to be particularly useful in my own teaching, as I seek to move towards a more student-centered practice. But as I began to engage with critical and queer disability studies, I have become concerned with the ways in which critical pedagogy constructs passivity and receptivity as unilaterally negative and how this contributes to an overall devaluing of anything passive and receptive, characteristics which are traditionally associated with femininity.

As a gay/queer individual, I look with dismay at the ways in which receptive/feminized /submissive roles (often referred to in the gay community as "bottom;" in Portuguese it is "passive;" in Spanish, "pasivo;" and in French, "passif") are looked down upon and the ways in which active/masculine/dominant (often referred to in the gay community as "top;" or in Portuguese, "ativo;" Spanish, "activo;" and French, "actif") roles are valued and privileged. Critical pedagogy, I fear, replicates similar, sexist dynamics by privileging active forms of learning over passive ones.

Similarly, as a disabled individual who has psychiatric and learning disabilities, I am sometimes (necessarily) placed in a more receptive role rather than an active one. When I am not able to use language to advocate for myself in ways that society would consider intelligible, I find myself in the position of having to submit to institutions or individuals that have to discern my needs and how to meet them. Freire, as a literacy educator, greatly emphasized linguistic communication, but it can sometimes overshadow other modes of understanding. Because of this emphasis, critical educators often fail in our goal to de-objectify and re-humanize those students whose disabilities hinder the use of expressive language.

Feminist critiques of Freire have drawn attention to the absence of women's experiences and his failure to confront patriarchy and sexism (Weiler, 2001). Freire, Weiler argued, also failed to engage in intersectional analysis and to consider the "complexities and differences among real people" (p. 75). Absent from most of these feminist critiques, however, has been an exploration of the way in which Freire constructs receptivity as a negative attribute. Aside from Gregoriou's brief mention of the problem (2001, p. 139), there were no other references to the way that Freire construction of receptivity.

To further explore and contextualize this problem, I examined existing research within the field of curriculum studies. I found that curriculum studies scholars have long been concerned about the myopic focus that the educational scholars have; they worry that by focusing solely on teaching, we remove students as agents and ascribe agency only to the teacher. Luhmann (1998), for example, warned that in traditional education, and even in progressive education, "learning...is relegated to the teacher's effort and to good teaching, an assumption that gives way to some (fantasmic) investments in the role of the teacher in the learning process" (p. 148). If only we can teach better, students will learn what the curriculum requires them to learn, the traditional argument goes. And even the more critical forms of education also rely on the teacher as the key agent in the process.

Lewis (2013) differentiated learning from study, proposing that learning requires actualizing one's potential in a measureable fashion, while study is more free-form, less goal-oriented, and questions the very nature and existence of potential. Likewise, Pinar (2015) cautioned that curriculum has become intertwined with instruction, and that we need to force "the teaching genie back into the bottle" (p. 20) and abandon our assumption that learning is always tied to teaching. If we are to put this genie back in the bottle, we will have to make a theoretical and practical case for student agency, which requires us to explore the possibility of an agential, receptive subject position.

The goal of this article, therefore, is to find a way to reclaim receptivity and to argue for the need to transform theorists' conceptions of receptivity from an undesirable state of passivity into a full-fledged subject position which can be tactically deployed by students. Moreover, I want to suggest that there are many ways in which agency can be enacted and that, by taking into account this more expanded concept of agency, we as critical educators can dramatically increase the liberatory potential of critical pedagogy.

From Objects to Subjects: The Need for a Dialogical Praxis

One of the main points in Freire's work that has had lasting resonance with feminist scholars has been the way in which he explored dehumanization and objectification (Weiler, 2001). Likewise, rather than jumping immediately into reclaiming receptivity, I want to first

explicate why reversing objectification is so important to critical pedagogy, and how we can reclaim receptivity without being resigned to perpetual objecthood.

A key goal in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was to re-animate and re-humanize the oppressed through critical education. Freire argued that the capitalist class objectifies the oppressed, turning them into objects that can be moved around and manipulated for profit. Freire sought to empower the oppressed to turn themselves back into subjects capable of shaping their own destiny. Under capitalism, Freire argued, “the oppressed, as objects, as ‘things,’ have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them” (1993, p. 60). In other words, as objects, the oppressed lack agency and are merely at the whim of the capitalist class.

Dehumanization and objectification. In response to the ways in which the capitalist class dehumanizes the oppressed, many critical scholars believe that re-humanization forms the crux of critical pedagogy. In order to explore re-humanization, I suggest we must first look at dehumanization. Chen (2012) classified dehumanization into two types: it can involve “the removal of qualities especially cherished as human,” but can also involve “the more active making of an object” (p. 43). In Freire’s work, dehumanization is not merely removing human-like qualities from the oppressed, but rather, it actively objectifies. Freire wrote that the oppressor “de-animate[s] everything and everything it encounters” (1993, p. 60), thus turning the oppressed into objects. Similar dynamics, Freire suggested, operate in the classroom when our pedagogy works to objectify students. By naming this dehumanization, however, critical educators can work to undo it and work towards a goal of human emancipation.

To achieve human emancipation, Freire believed that the oppressed have to learn about their collective reality together and then make their own changes to reality, rather than merely be told what to do by others, be it the capitalist class or self-styled revolutionary leaders. He wrote that “attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building...” (1993, p. 65). If in seeking to liberate the oppressed, you merely reinforce their objectification through your teaching style and revolutionary practice, then you have not allowed them to move from objecthood to subjecthood and have ultimately failed to liberate them.

Through dialogue and through language, the oppressed can be re-animated. It is not mere coincidence that Freire chooses language and literacy as his method of animation. Chen (2012) wrote of language’s incredible power of animation:

Language is as much alive as it is dead, and it is certainly material. For humans and others, spoken and signed speech can involve the tongue, vocal tract, breath, lips, hands, eyes, and shoulders. It is a corporeal, sensual, embodied act. It is by definition, animated. (p. 53)

Through embodied praxis, through language, through dialogue, the oppressed come alive and become subjects, capable of fulfilling their potential.

The dehumanization of the disabled. The concept of treating humans as objects is particularly evident in the way that the larger society treats the disabled as objects. Schweik (2009) discussed how the ugly laws in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries forbid the disabled from being out in public, treated them like “obstructions;” closer to a “pile of bricks” than to human (cited in Chen, 2012, p. 43). Chen continued the analysis by discussing

the relationship between abstraction, (in)animacy, and the human targets of these laws, and contended that this relationship sutures “animacy terrains to public sentiment, legal bodies, and notions of propriety” (p. 43), delineating who and what can be a subject or an object, and the hierarchies that define who has agency in our reality.

In exploring this objectification of disabled people through a Freireian lens, I ask us to consider that not all disabled people are necessarily capable of speech, reading, or other verbal communication. Is language a precondition to being human, as some theorists argue? Are there perhaps ways, other than language, through which we can critically animate those de-animated (and who have their agency removed) by capitalism?

I will come back to the questions of the agency of disabled people and Freire’s implications for them. The next section follows up on Chen’s animacy hierarchies in order to consider the ways in which some humans are classified as active, agential, animated, masculine subjects and others as passive, receptive, feminine, de-animated objects. Concomitant to this classification is the common belief that receptivity cannot be a subject-position, that if one merely receives, agency and subjecthood are impossible. I argue instead for the existence of a receptive subject position that transcends the binaries of active/passive in order to further shed light on the situation of those who fail to occupy the privileged masculine subject positions.

Must a Receptacle be Passive? Towards a Subject Position of Receptivity

In order to explore the possibilities of receptivity for critical education, I first review how receptivity is figured in Freire’s work. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he resoundingly condemned what he calls “the banking model of education.” In this model, he constructed the teacher as an active agent and the students as passive recipients.

Freire (1993) argued that “the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher” (p. 73). If students’ agency is illusory, the only thing that matters in the banking model is the teacher’s decisions and choices. Students have no agency and merely receive whatever the teacher has to give them. “Worse yet,” Freire contended, “it turns them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” (p. 72). These students/receptacles are specifically described by Freire as meek (p. 73). When I consider Freire’s conception, I think of these students as the Stepford Wives, robotic and without any psychic interiority, merely filing away any knowledge the teacher gives them to store in their heads.

Reclaiming receptivity. Freire’s idea of a receptacle as empty, passive, and meek has some unintended consequences when considered through the lens of gender: the receptacle becomes synonymous with a lack of agency; and by extension, women and others relegated to receptacle-positions have their agency denied as well. Although in later editions Freire tried to evade these by referring to the teacher as “she” rather than “he,” gender roles still haunt his discussion of receptivity.

In an alternative perspective on receptivity, Gregoriou (2001) wanted to reclaim receptivity as a practice of choosing to invite in, welcome, and host the other, rather than merely a “passive reception of facts” (p. 139). In attempting reclamation, however, she cautions us against imagining receptivity as an “amorphous, immobile, and silent maternal substratum that envelopes and nurtures” (p. 139). This maternal conception, Gregoriou worries, fails to

“deconstruct the gender, spatial, and ethical configurations of receiving, enveloping, and hosting” (p. 139). I attempt to offer such a deconstruction here by exploring the foundations of receptivity within Western philosophy.

Plato and the ‘receptacle.’ Where does this problematic maternal conception of receptivity come from? This notion of the feminine as an “amorphous and silent” space from which everything else arises (and in which the feminine lacks an animating principle) dates all the way back to Plato’s *Timaeus*. Although it is possible that others prior to Plato may have had similar ideas, Plato is commonly credited as being the origin of this concept. This conception of the receptacle formed the basis for the “Aristotelian cosmology, physics, and biology,” and thus this story of creation has “reverberated across the millennia” (Bianchi, 2006, p. 125).

Bianchi described the receptacle in *Timaeus* as having “undeniable and maternal resonances” and providing the “substrate upon and the space” in which the (masculine) templates for reality (Platonic Forms) become actual material reality (p. 124). Being an “invisible and formless space” (Bianchi, p. 127) in which the masculine can create, the Platonic receptacle is clearly feminized.

But there is a slight problem here: the Platonic receptacle is not quite the same as the actual feminine that we experience in the real world. The receptacle in *Timaeus* lacks material reality, and as a consequence precludes the existence of non-masculine agency. In order to further understand this problem of receptive agency, I engage here with feminist and queer critiques of Plato, and then address what the implications of these critiques have for our practice as critical educators.

Is the receptacle the same as the feminine? This formless space within which everything else arises is feminized in some ways but is not synonymous with the feminine, Butler (1993) argued. The tendency to conflate the two has potentially dangerous implications. Bianchi argued that Irigaray (another feminist scholar) considered there to be a danger in identifying feminine figures such as the nurse, the mother, and the womb with the receptacle. In Irigaray’s conception, to conflate the two would “immediately and mistakenly...reduce her to a reproductive function, to perform a violent catachresis which displaced and erased everything about her that was not in the service of maternity or nurturance” (Binachi, 2006, p. 137). Rather than being a feminine figure, Butler argued, the receptacle becomes the “impossible yet necessary foundation of what can be thematized and figured” (Butler, p. 15), that which “cannot be said to be anything...the impossible necessity that enables any ontology” (Butler, p. 13).

What makes the receptacle impossible in an ontological sense? Actual, instantiated figures of femininity like the nurse and the mother are very different from the formless feminized receptacle. Creation of any actual material reality, in this theory, requires moving from the formless space into actual material reality. In this heteropatriarchal logic, an active masculine principle is needed to actualize instantiation, and the masculine imaginary believes this can occur without any active participation from either the instantiated or the formless feminine. Butler argued, “In the place of a femininity which makes a contribution to reproduction, we have a phallic Form that reproduces only and always further versions of itself, and does this through the feminine, but with no assistance from her” (1993, p. 16), an idea that critical theorists refer to as “masculine parthenogenesis.” Thus the creation of the feminine becomes impossible because it would have to be made out of only masculinity with no participation from the feminine. With masculine parthenogenesis being always incomplete, however, the formless receptacle becomes

the base material that can make the whole system work, thus becoming impossible *but* absolutely necessary.

The feminine, although being excluded from having any active masculine principle, nonetheless has functions to perform in this schema of reality. Bianchi discussed how the receptacle is both malleable but also capable of congelation; the receptacle must be capable of “providing a safe and stable reflective container and mirror for masculinity” (2006, p. 129).

The functions of the receptacle. When considering Bianchi’s notion of the receptacle as a mirror, I am reminded of Freire’s “student as receptacle.” Perhaps the Freireian student as receptacle is just a mirror for the knowledge that the teacher offers, knowledge that becomes concretized as it is placed into students’ heads. Herein lies the trap that both Bianchi and Freire fall into; clearly, a student actually has a rather complex and significant role in the process of education, one that is glossed over in the mirror analogy.

Bianchi wrote of the receptacle’s role as “restless materialization, of molding, of birthing, of dissolution” (2006, p. 130). Butler likewise argued that the receiving principle has an important role to play: “her proper function is to receive, to take, accept, welcome, include, and even comprehend” (1993, p. 14). But Bianchi’s conceptualization of the receptacle falls short; rather than providing the foundations for my project of agency, Bianchi contended instead that the receptacle is not a subject, that the receptacle lacks ontology, and that the receptacle cannot have subjectivity (Bianchi, p. 132).

Gregoriou (2001) would disagree; Gregoriou’s reformulation of the Platonic receptacle gave agency to the receptacle, proposing that receptivity *can be* a subject-position, *does* have an ontology, and *can* possess a very clear subjectivity. Following Derrida, Gregoriou proposed a “re-articulation of receptivity, from an ontological location of being to a tactics of approaching others, [which] enables us to rethink discursive responsibility” (p. 143). Receptivity, according to Gregoriou, is not merely a passive space but a key way in which we (both students and teachers) can take up the challenges of a postcolonial pedagogy and truly listen and receive what the Other has to say. Rather than suggesting that we give up our position as receptacle and invert heteromale positionalities (thus buying into those oppressive systems), Gregoriou proposed that we learn how to “practice [our] positionality as receptacle” (p. 143).

The problem with critical pedagogy texts being aimed at the teacher. Although Freire rather explicitly wrote a book on how not to treat students as receptacles, he ironically wrote to the teacher and not to the student, thus re-inscribing the role of the teacher as the agent and the student as passive. Weiler (2001) worried about Freire’s overemphasis on the heroism of the revolutionary teacher, who is “imagined as male and as existing solely in the public world” and who is presented in Freire’s work in a glorified, masculinized manner (p. 76). Freire’s conception of the valiant teacher who rescues their students is problematic; it re-inscribed the very power relations that critical educators were trying to challenge and ended up re-objectifying the students. Similarly, when we direct our remarks on education only to the teacher, we reinforce the concept of the teacher as the sole actor in education.

Learning how to practice our agency and positionality as receptacle is precisely what Freire failed to address. I argue that a receptacle-student can reject passivity without having to take on a masculine, active, teacherly role. Gregoriou, if re-writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, would probably write about how students can tactically deploy recept(acle)-ivity as a way of

reclaiming their own educational agency. I call this hypothetical book the “Pedagogy of the Student,” which is also the title of this article.

Freire suggested that the masculine logic of penetration sucks the life out of knowledge and merely deposits “contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” into the feminized, receptacle-students, turning formerly animated knowledge and words into “hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity” (1993, p. 71). I suggest that Gregoriou’s concept of receptacle-positionality could form the very foundation for a dialogical praxis, rather than the receptacle being something to be discarded in favor of making the oppressed (students) into active, masculinized subjects.

My vision of this receptacle-positionality involves students claiming their own education. Freire sees the students in a non-Freireian classroom as merely filing away and sometimes making sense of the fragmented, disconnected pieces that teachers impart to them. But in reality, receiving information and constructing reality is not merely filling the void. It is an engaged process, through agency by the student, and it is never possible for students to be purely passive. Bianchi (2006) discussed the Platonic receptacle as having many functions: it is “inviting in, receiving, holding, appropriating on the one hand, and opening out, providing space, giving, dispersing on the other” (p. 132). Similarly, constructivist and sociocultural theories teach us that students make sense of their own world and reality, taking in and transforming what they learn in a social context, and that this happens in all classrooms, not just those whose teachers subscribe to “constructivist” and “socioculturalist” ideals. It is never possible to be totally passive, even when you are receiving.

Can you achieve receptacle positionality merely by taking on an active role? This constructivist teaching fallacy (Mayer, 2004) comes into play when someone believes that only constructivist teaching can lead to constructivist learning. On the contrary, constructivist learning is always happening, whether or not teachers set out to create this type of learning through pedagogy. Likewise, when encountering Freire’s ideas about the problems with passive students, many critical educators at first believe it would suffice to flip the dynamics of the traditional classroom and have students taken on an active, masculine role in the classroom.

This is not always as simple as it seems, though. I suggest that receptacle-positionality differs considerably from merely taking on an active, masculine role. Consider, for example, my first human sexuality class in my second quarter of my undergraduate career, a 550-student lecture in my University’s largest lecture hall. In preparing for the class, I checked out every book on sexuality that I could find at the library and read them cover-to-cover. The lecture class was engaging and well-planned, but terribly heterosexist and very didactic, with multiple-choice tests being the primary form of assessment. A frequent topic of discussion in the mandatory small-group sections was the multiple-choice tests, as many students were upset with the format of the tests. When the teacher responded to their frustration by offering the alternative of writing a research paper and answering end-of-chapter questions, the complaining students were uninterested.

I found it disheartening that they were unwilling to take any responsibility for their own education, but on my part, I stayed after class in order to discuss my ideas with the lecturer: I asked her for reading recommendations, I designed surveys and research projects to administer to the class, I volunteered to help her put on an academic conference that she was bringing to town. Freire would say that sitting in a lecture hall would make me a mere receptacle of knowledge. But I turned it into a dialogical encounter through my initiative and agency. Or did I...?

I worry that I may have been simply flipping from being the feminized receptacle to being a masculinized agent through the way I decided to engage with the lecture course. I wonder in retrospect: could a student sit there, listen and take the multiple-choice tests, and still enact a receptive praxis? Or must they, in order to achieve critical consciousness and humanization, forgo the feminine, reject the void, and take up a masculinist subject position? In order to further understand this problem of taking receptive femininity and attempting to reclaim it by turning it into active masculinity, I next examine a parallel situation in feminist science studies. In this particular situation, feminist scholars have attempted to re-envision the egg's role in the process of reproduction but unintentionally ended up constructing it as active/masculine and consequently, re-inscribe hegemonic masculinity.

Reclaiming the role of the egg in reproduction. In the traditional concept of reproduction, we have a “placid egg, drift[ing] luxuriously along the fallopian tube until it is captured by the valiant sperm” (Schiebinger, 1995, para. 2). In the '80s, scientists such as Gerald and Hellen Schatten have instead conceptualized the egg as an “active agent, directing the growth of microvilli to capture and tether the sperm” (Schiebinger, 1995, para. 3). Much like my fears about urging passive, receptive students to take on an active masculine role in the classroom, Schiebinger cautioned about feminist scholars' attempt to masculinize the egg: “Not only is the egg energized, it is ascribed the valued ‘active’ characteristics of the sperm. (The sperm does not become passive)” (para. 3). Thus, both the sperm and the egg become masculine, similar to the ways in which both the teacher of my class and I as the student each took on a role as an active agent in the classroom. Moreover, the telos of this process is assumed to be fertilization; the egg has agency only insofar as she “chooses” to facilitate the process of reproduction and we do not see a failure to fertilize as the egg “deciding” not to be fertilized.

Schiebinger (1995) continued by stating, “Like women themselves, female biology is all too often expected to assimilate the values of the dominant culture” (para. 3). Feminist scientists often fall into the trap of trying to reject the feminine and embrace the masculine, much as I suggest that Friere falls into the trap of insisting that students need to take on an active role in the classroom and reject receptivity. Gregoriou, however, offered ideas for embracing receptivity without having to merely adopt as masculine subject-position, ideas that I believe can rescue Freireian pedagogy from this dilemma.

Hosting and witnessing as receptivity. Gregoriou (2001) believed that a crucial part of receptivity is receptivity to new ideas, to be willing to host and play witness to the other who is unlike oneself. It is not that the oppressed cannot speak (to make a nod to Spivak's seminal essay “Can the subaltern speak?”). Rather, I suggest, the subaltern must have a receptive partner on the other end to listen and play host to their worldview and their reality. Freire does not talk about an ethics and ontology of receptivity, but the ethics that Gregoriou proposed seems like a good fit with his ideas about dialogue. Shaull (1993) discussed how, in Freire's view, “every human being, no matter how ‘ignorant’ or submerged in the ‘culture of silence’...is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others” (p. 32). Learning to practice receptivity to the other is a key component of a dialogical educational practice and is something that we need to teach our students (as well as practice as teachers ourselves!). More than just being active learners, we need to be active recipients of what others have to offer.

There was another key component to my experience in the human sexuality lecture class that I have not yet addressed. I sat next to and befriended a radical queer of color activist who

was also taking the class. We would talk during breaks (and exchange occasional remarks during lecture) about what a radical queer approach to the lecture material would be. On my part, those discussions were mostly receptive. He had a very different worldview from what was presented in class and what I had encountered so far in my rather limited life experience, and so my role and positionality there was mostly to actively listen and validate what he was sharing. To me, this is what Gregoriou means by receptivity: not merely listening and filing away information, but really engaging with the critical implications and letting what you take in have the power to change your own view of the world.

Luhmann (1998) will help us further explore Gregoriou's question of implications in learning by clarifying what an implication-based theory of learning would look like. Learning, according to Luhmann, is more about how you as a learner are changed by knowledge than about you acquiring knowledge; in the process of learning, your identity and positionality transform. She proposes that we shift "from transmission strategies to an inquiry into conditions for understanding, or refusing, knowledge" (p. 148). She proposes that learners, rather than memorize what the teacher offers and filing it away in their heads, should ask themselves: "What does this information do to one's own sense of self? What does this knowledge ask me to reconsider about myself and the subject studied?" (p. 150). These are examples of what "The Pedagogy of the Student" asks us to consider and a framework for the types of questions that we (as students) must ask in order to fully embody a receptive subject position.

To make a nod back to Pinar, if we are to put the teaching genie back in the bottle, critical scholars need to give attention to the ways in which students have agency, the ways in which receptivity can be agential, and the ways in which we can have curriculum without having teaching. Pinar (2015) proposed that, instead of "curriculum and instruction," we should return to older notions of having "curriculum and study" (p. 18), a subtle but deft linguistic move that places the agency for learning on the students instead of on the teacher. If we truly want to take up Freire's challenge of moving beyond the banking model of teaching, we have to give up on instruction, teaching, and pedagogy as our objects of study. Instead of calling the study of Freirian-style education critical pedagogy, perhaps we need to rename this field critical study and/or critical learning. This would shift the focus away from the teacher and on to the student, allowing us to look at models of reception instead of models of transmission.

Applying receptivity to disability. What does a receptive subject position look like when we consider it in terms of disability? Although disability cannot be conflated with gender, there is a "correspondence between disability and femininity" (Samuels, 2002, p. 65), in that a woman is seen as a "deformed male," but also that disabled men are de-masculinized and "lumped together with women, children, and the elderly in the realm of abject and dependent bodies" (p. 65). Thus, these arguments about the need for reclaiming receptivity become just as important when considered in light of disability. In the next section, I illustrate the possibilities for subjecthood and agency by exploring the problem within critical pedagogy of disabled people who have limited (or no) access to linguistic communication.

Disability and the Role of Language in Animation

I want to revisit some of the questions at the end of the first section, in light of what I have discussed about reclaiming a receptive subject position, and to explore what receptivity means

for the disabled. In this case, I say “the disabled” rather than “disabled persons” or “people with disabilities” because I want to explore the ways in which animacy hierarchies classify the disabled as objects rather than subjects and as passive rather than active and to tease out some of the relationships between animacy and active/passive gender roles. Connecting this to language, I want to explore the limitations of a Freireian pedagogy when confronted by those who do not use language to communicate. Moreover, I want to analyze the ways in which lack of language use is connected to objectification.

Expanding our definition of communication. In my second year of graduate school, I took a class on Art and Activism, and we spent some time studying Augusto Boal’s method of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, based on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this method of popular education, the audience is allowed to come up onto stage and reposition the actors and to give them new instructions. At the time, I was a regular substitute in an elementary special education class. A young boy in the class, maybe 6 years old, came up to me, and without words, took my arms and repositioned me into a position that was more pleasing to him. This experience fascinated me because, while I had to take a graduate seminar to learn how to do this, a young boy with very limited communication skills came up with it on his own without any prompting. Furthermore, it helped me to realize the importance of nonverbal communication in critical pedagogy.

Many theorists consider language to be a unique property of humans, and thus for these theorists, even complex communication amongst nonhuman animals still does not count as language (Chen, 2012, p. 51). Similarly to how nonhuman communication is *a priori* written out of the definition of language, Kafer (2013) argued that ableist logics tend to restrict many forms of communication used by the disabled from these models of language. She wrote, “Spoken words and written text are almost always the only forms of communication recognized and valued as language” (p. 145). This emphasis on spoken words and written text is evidenced in Freire’s writing. For example, when discussing dialogue, he writes, “If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity” (p. 88). Freire thus presumed that we are all capable of dialogue and, moreover, that we cannot become fully human without it.

Kafer reminded us to consider the myriad ways in which communication can occur. Special educators talk about this when they refer to “multiple modalities of expression,” but critical pedagogy tends to ignore it. Kafer challenged us to consider: “How might we imagine futures that hold space and possibility for those who communicate in ways we do not yet recognize as communication, let alone understand?” (2013, p. 67). Critical educators must consider this challenge in our work, in order to recognize and change the ways in which we privilege some communications over others, and to be truly receptive to what students have to tell, even if it is not in words.

Dependency’s relationship to passivity. Those who do not use traditional verbal and/or written language are often dependent on caretakers or bureaucratic apparatuses to handle activities of daily living. This dependency can often be constructed as passivity although there are definitely many non-verbal ways to indicate assent or disapproval. Many people with disabilities labelled “noncommunicative” make use of these methods of communication occasionally. Kafer described a non-ambulatory and supposedly non-communicative child who

was able to express “experiencing confusion, feeling boredom, and having musical preferences” (2013, p. 63). The child reacted to stimuli in different ways and her parents were able to infer what her desires would be. The Freireian focus on written and spoken language as a means of transforming one’s world, though, presumes that all people are capable of it. Tools exist to create embodied, physical, and critical experiences (such as the Theatre of the Oppressed), yet those tools are absent from most courses on critical pedagogy and are rarely used by practitioners of critical pedagogy. Those who are incapable of linguistic communication (as traditionally defined) are no less capable of transforming their lived experience and reality.

Even if we do redefine what counts as linguistic communication, there is still an additional problem here. Lacking verbal or written language does seem to place one further down on the animacy hierarchy. Disabled people who have limited linguistic skills or who lack intelligibility tend to be viewed more as objects rather than as subjects. What does it mean to practice a receptive subject position for someone who is in that position not by choice, as opposed to the Freireian object-person who has the potential of moving from object to subject through the acquisition of linguistic skills and a critical consciousness?

The argument here is not merely that the oppressed must always be receptive. It is just as critical for those with power in society to use the tools and techniques of receptivity. It is much like I demonstrated with the queer of color activist that I befriended my freshman year. When it comes to disabled individuals, others need to support them in self-advocacy and self-determination whenever possible. Disabled people may *sometimes* be dependent on others in order to communicate. This is clearly a different situation than what Freire considered and something that scholars of critical pedagogy and curriculum studies need to further study.

By exploring these liminal cases, we can gain a better understanding of what a Freireian pedagogy entails and to begin shifting from a Freireian pedagogy to Freireian learning and Freirian study. Therefore, I issue a challenge to scholars of Freire and of critical pedagogy: when we talk about dehumanization in our work, we need to critically explore the ways in which animacy hierarchies appear in our work and the ways in which a myopic focus on empowerment through language may unintentionally leave a certain class of people without a subject position, subjectivity, or even agency. Moreover, we need to consider how narrative of “empowerment” of students re-inscribes the teacher as agent, and unwittingly risks re-inscribing the very dynamics that we as progressive educators thought we were dismantling.

Conclusion

In light of both the need to reclaim receptivity and the need to account for non-linguistic communication, Freire’s theories definitely need revamping. Nonetheless, Freire provides an insightful lens for those seeking to build critical consciousness and to transform their educational practice. We need not remove him from the reading list, but rather, to read him in conjunction with queer studies and disability studies texts in order to gain new insights into his work. In doing so, we as scholars can analyze some of the complexities involved in his figuration of the “receptacle” as undesirable and of linguistic communication being a prerequisite for agency. This can help us create a more inclusive and incisive critical pedagogy. Moreover, with the possibility of students, disabled people, women, and others who fall lower on animacy hierarchies are able to claim receptive subject positions that have clear path to agency, we can

have a “bottom-up” critical pedagogy that actually springs from the oppressed rather from merely from the noblesse oblige of teachers who deign to “empower” their students.

Notes

¹ See also Sheldon (2016), where I used the notion of gay male versatility as a way of escaping the binary of active/passive that exists in the banking model of learning.

² In a previous version of this article, I called this hypothetical book the “Learning of the Oppressed” to emphasize learning over teaching and study over pedagogy. After careful reflection, though, I think the idea that students do pedagogy is perhaps closer to what I intend than the idea that the oppressed learn.

³ The gay reference and pun here is intended.

⁴ Following Pinar, we may want to call it critical learning or critical study instead of critical pedagogy.

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