

Critical Pedagogy: Resistance as Evidence of Learning

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While resistance is usually viewed in a negative context, this is not always the case. Resistance can be viewed as positive, critical thinking, learning, and questioning. Student resistance to learning is typically viewed in a negative way that needs correcting in a standard traditional classroom. Examining student resistance through a more critical theoretical lens reveals that student resistance is more than just a classroom disruption and is a positive sign of student development. Understanding the endless inherent and oppressive flaws that lie in standard classroom practices, it is clear that resistance is essential to the learning process. Critical pedagogy theorists would view student resistance as evidence of learning, critical thinking, and a step towards a solution to the teacher-student contradiction that lies in a standard traditional classroom.

Before continuing, it is important to define and set up a framework for what resistance and standard traditional classrooms are. Henry Giroux (1983) has conveniently set up a framework and definition for resistance that has been adopted by many compositionists (Miraglia, 1997). Giroux (1983) places resistance into two different classifications; resistance is either an oppositional behavior or truly resistant behavior. In other words, “*oppositional* behaviors are empty constructs that reify rather than resist dominant ideologies; *resistant* behaviors challenge those dominant ideologies with self-aware logic and creativity” (Miraglia, 1997, p. 416). “Giroux's lexicon of resistance will be adapted as follows: “Opposition” will denote behaviors and strategies that are regarded resistant in a negative sense, while “resistance” will be taken to signify behaviors and strategies that are seen as resistant in a positive sense (Miraglia, 1997, p. 416). This research paper is going to focus on the oppositional behavior of student resistance in the classroom.

To define what a standard classroom is, this paper will adapt Paulo Freire's (1968) banking concept of education. In typical narrative or "banking" teaching style, the "teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable," this style of teaching becomes "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (Freire, 1968, pp. 71-72). This banking education style is inherently oppressive as it assumes that "the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing." (Freire, 1968, p. 73). An alternative to this for example could be democratic classroom practices, the banking style of teaching is rejected, and the student-teacher power imbalance is balanced. In this power-sharing style of teaching, students and teachers negotiate everything from the curriculum to how long the length of the class will last (Shor, 1996). That is a research paper for another day though.

Miraglia (1997) provides an example of oppositional behaviors from the perspective of the administration side stating that "teacher/administrator [are] invested, more so than other roles, with the maintenance and reproduction of tradition, it seeks strategies for delegitimizing and devaluing behaviors which represent non-compliance to that tradition, to traditional roles, or to the reproduction of traditional value" (Miraglia, 1997, p. 416). An example of oppositional behavior from students comes from Shor (1996) describing a form of oppositional behavior he faced from students before the first day of class even started that he calls Siberian Syndrome. Shor (1996) defines Siberian Syndrome as "[students] learned habit of automatically filling the distant corners first, representing their subordinate and alienated position, which drives them to seek the remote seats of any classroom they inhabit" (p. 12). In layman's terms, sitting as far from the front of the classroom and professor. This is oppositional behavior because by sitting in the back of classrooms students conform to the standard classroom practice assumption that the

teacher is the “sole authority,” yet at the same time it challenges “[the teachers] authority by sitting as far away as they could from [the teacher]” (Shor, 1996, p. 12). While resistant, it is just oppositional behavior as it still reifies the standard classroom instead of truly resistant. Standard classroom teachers would see this as students that are “anxious to prove their maturity” and by immediately checking the student's behavior they will “nearly always straighten out” (Conner & Glenn, 1992, p. 42). In Shor’s case, disciplining the Siberian Syndrome by creating a seating chart is how Conner and Glenn would want Shor to react.

To avoid standard classroom teaching practices this would be the incorrect reaction to oppositional behavior, by disciplining oppositional behavior it is “assume[d] that the teaching institution are the teacher both exercise a creative power of good [, and] [t]he student, who is invited to benefit from this ... must follow behavioral guidelines in order ... to be present in the classroom” (Miraglia, 1997, p. 418). Like Freire (1968) says, in “the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider knowing nothing” (p. 72). Oppositional behaviors like sitting in the back of the class would make Freire proud, Freire (1996) stated that it is “essential is that learners, though subjected to the praxis of the “banking system,” maintain alive the flame of resistance that sharpens their curiosity and stimulates their capacity for risk” (p. 12). Jerry Farber (1967) describes education in an oppressive way like Freire, stating that “school begins to make sense” once we realize the “academic bullshit, where dedicated teachers pass their knowledge on to a new generation” (p. 1), painting the professor as an oppressive all-knowing being that we as students should be grateful to be in the presence of. Both Farber and Freire would applaud these oppositional acts of resistance. Farber (1967) would see these little acts of resistance as signs of life and intelligence, as he describes the average students writing as “lobotomized” and how

seeing these lifeless students makes him want to “caress their poor tortured heads” (pp. 2-3). Robert Brooke (1987) argues that “students disobey, [they] write letters instead of taking notes, and whisper with their peers to show they are more than just students and can think independently of classroom expectation” (p. 1), for students to show that they are more than just students through acts of oppositional behavior is a clear sign of critical and independent thinking.

In Robert Brooke’s (1987) article “Underlife and Writing Class,” he provides an alternative, but still positive interpretation of student resistance. Brooke uses the sociological concept the ‘underlife’ to make sense of student resistance in the writing class. The underlife described “as the activities individuals engage in to show that their identities are different from more complex than the identities assigned them by organizational roles” (p. 142), in this case the organizational role is that of the oppressed student. Underlife, which is just another word for resistance) is defined essentially the same way Giroux defines resistance: There are two forms of underlife, disruptive (truly resistant) and contained (oppositional behavior). Disruptive is where underlife action aims to dismantle and restructure an organization and contained is when “[students] work around the institution to assert [their] difference from the assigned [student] role, rather than working for the elimination of the institution” (Brooke, 1987, p. 143). Brooke (1987) provides and examines examples of underlife behavior in writing classes through the perspective that “these underlife behaviors that students are developing their individual stances towards classroom experiences” (p. 144). Examples of contained underlife, Brooke (1987) describes are students whispering to each other, passing notes, doodling instead of note taking, as well as other forms of oppositional behavior or underlife. What is interesting about the underlife activities was “the extent and content” of these underlife activities and more so how “they are usually connected to class activities in some way” (p. 144). Brooke, like most teachers, assumes

when students are engaging in acts such as note passing or whispering, they are talking about something completely off topic. With a more critical analysis Brooke (1987) gives an alternative explanation stating that “[t]he students are developing their own stances towards class activity, not whispering about unrelated subjects” (p. 144), in other words they are developing their own identity and critical thinking skills. Brooke observed a type of underlife he where “students tend to find creative uses for classroom activities and materials which are purposefully different from what the teacher intended” (p. 144), this describes a fundamental stage Paulo Freire describes that is needed to free the oppressed. Paulo Freire (1968) in his book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” states the following:

A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice co-intentional education. Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement. (p. 69).

Even though Brooke only observed students re-creating knowledge, thinking critically, and creatively about potatoes, it still directly relates to the general principal Freire presents. Once again showing how student oppositional behavior or underlife shows development in student identity, creativity, critical thinking, and overall evidence of positive educational development.

Ultimately, viewing student resistance through a deeper and theoretical level, in this case Freirean critical pedagogy, casts student resistance in a much more positive light, specifically student development. The standard traditional classroom leaves students powerless and searching

for identity, thus leading to student resistance and oppositional acts. Examples from Freire, Giroux, Shor, Farber, and Brooke, show that student resistance is not simply attempts to disrupt the classroom, but an indication that students are thinking independently and critically as well as applying knowledge to their personal lives. These acts of resistance students display are their way of showing that they desire to participate in class, but in a way that makes sense to the student. Being able to recognize student resistance beyond the surface and seeing it as a natural and even necessary step in the learning process will naturally lead to more engaged students.

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