

Slimer, Slime, and the Thingness of Pedagogy¹

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Outside a hotel room, someone spots a slimy, neon green ghost frantically stuffing discarded food from a room service cart into its mouth. The person remarks to himself, “Disgusting blob.” This blob rapidly flees through a wall into a different hallway. It leaves a sticky residue. The ghost spots a different person and purposefully accelerates in his direction, knocking him over, covering him with slime, and then disappearing.

This is the first encounter the Ghostbusters have with Slimer, a ghostlike apparition from the film *Ghostbusters* (1984). The sensation of this slime-filled encounter presents an opportunity to interrogate assumptions made about things, subjectivity, pedagogy, and sensation in educational studies. For example, how does pedagogy feel? Using Slimer as a metaphor, this paper considers the sensation and tangibility of pedagogy. The intent is to explore the *thingness* of pedagogy through Slimer and what this thingness holds for thinking experimentally about pedagogy (Ellsworth 2005). Engaging in this type of conceptual exploration suggests that attention to pedagogical sensations can disrupt commonplace perceptions of the cognitive/somatic dichotomy thus complicating what constitutes appropriate knowledge and learning selves.

Ghostbusters is an early 1980s comedy-fantasy film that follows four main characters—Peter Venkman, Ray Stantz, Egon Spengler, and Winston Zeddemore—as they face the uncanny in New York City, from demonic possession to poltergeists. The film opens at the New York Public Library. A librarian replacing items among claustrophobic bookshelves runs away in terror after a poltergeist causes an explosion of catalog cards around her. The main plot follows the Ghostbusters as they confront increasing paranormal activity, culminating in their victory against an ancient demonic god who accessed the city through a supernatural portal. However, this paper will focus on the specific scene that depicts the moment when Peter (referred to as Venkman), Ray, and Egon encounter and capture their first ghost, Slimer.

Using Slimer as a conceptual tool is purposeful. Slimer is a ghost or, technically, a Class 5 Full Roaming Vapor. Slimer is a helpful way to illustrate sensation, pedagogy, and thingness. Slimer is pure slime, pure ectoplasm. Slimer illustrates a particular thingness in educational assumptions including “thing-power” to the affective sensations provoked with Slimer’s slime.

Slime’s impermanent shape oozes when transferred from an encounter with Slimer or removed from a container. Somatically engaging with the unbounded thing-power of slime, Slimer presents an affirmative pedagogy of thingness: a pedagogy that dismisses shallow limits defining appropriate production of knowledge and expectations of how to relate to objects, things, and, as in the case with Slimer, ghosts.

The paper is organized around five sections. The first section provides a brief background on postfoundational inquiry and new materialism, two approaches that frame the conversation regarding sensation, thingness, and pedagogy. Following this introduction, further section titles incorporate dialogue from the Slimer scene. The next two sections address pedagogy and sensation. The following two sections use Slimer to explore the thingness of pedagogy and implications for the role of embodiment in education. This order accomplishes two things: one, it establishes the specific approach to pedagogy and sensation used here and two, it provides a foundation for understanding how a new materialist approach can inform educational possibilities.

Reticulating Frameworks

Postfoundational inquiry is helpful for sifting through dominant educational assumptions and identifying attitudes that should be analyzed, critiqued, and discarded or reworked (Tavares 2016), thereby loosening narrow definitions of appropriate research. Here, the process of developing a question has as much weight as asking the question itself through self-awareness of the contingent nature of exploration. This pushes preconceived borders of inquiry, which parallels new materialism’s boundary pushing of subject-object relationality.

New materialism, the theoretical framework used in this paper, renews focus on the affective power of things (Bennett 2010). New materialism critiques the carefully constructed assumption of what determines proper relationality in that non-human entities are not inert and passive. In fact, they have the capacity to affect us. Additionally, because they have that capacity, they are not just objects to be poked, prodded, and measured. Secondly, it disrupts assumptions of self and subject that permeate through educational assumptions, in particular the Cartesian subject and the wholly rational human being. Through these approaches, this paper considers the

meaning inter/intra-object relationality (Bennett 2010) holds for challenging education's cognitive-somatic distinction, which views the mind as the subject of knowledge and the body as an obstacle (Baker 2015).

A new materialist approach to inter/intra-object relationality reworks the relationships both between and within human and nonhuman entities. Political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) describes this relationality within and between diverse nonhuman entities from electrical grids to worms. Educational scholars have used new materialism to interrogate the relationship between data and researcher (MacLure 2013) as well as the relational and embodied encounters between the various equipment at playground sites and children (Knight 2016). Additionally, in contrast to other object-oriented ontologies like speculative realism, new materialism draws attention to the ethical and political considerations of engaging with entities through sensations, without privileging what Nathan Snaza et al. (2016) describe as a "flat ontology that makes no distinctions" (xxix).

Pedagogy: "Don't Move! It Won't Hurt You!"

Pedagogy is a clumsy word. Pedagogy doesn't glide gracefully off one's tongue; instead it tumbles awkwardly out, a belly flop of a word. David Lusted (1986) writes, "it's an ugly word in print and on the tongue" (3). The sensation of saying "pedagogy" is not smooth like "graceful" nor does it connote substantiality through its rhythm like "curriculum." The word gurgles out. Sometimes students themselves draw attention to the word: "Oh, it's that weird word again! What is it? How do you say it?" The word itself is inspected, paced around, forgotten, and then provoked back into our awareness. It feels material, a type of thingness surrounding each utterance and an affective quality interacting with each of them in their own way.

A simple definition of pedagogy is that it is the art and dynamic process of teaching and learning. Ellsworth (1997) describes teaching as an impossible task because it is not guaranteed that a person/learning/thing/student will *learn exactly* what one teaches, which parallels Freire's (1970/1993) parallel critique of the banking model of education. The explanation can provoke but not directly communicate. Learning must take into account that person's experiences, pathways for interpretation, mood, and senses (Ellsworth 2005; Ellsworth 2011).

Perhaps this impossibility and predication to interpretation is what makes pedagogy an *art* of teaching and learning. Mechanics of teaching techniques aside, it is an art because of the creative approach and the

recognition of interpretation. Ellsworth (2011) observes, "Pedagogy does not follow rules, nor does it rule—but it is also NOT antagonistic or chaotic. Pedagogy is a living form. Pedagogical designs need to be worked out again and again" (305). This non-teleological perspective of pedagogy (Ellsworth 2011) is what makes it "a wicked problem—not a strategy" (306). Similarly, Slimer is also a "wicked problem" because it has no preconceived and distinct endpoint. Instead there is a more than in Slimer, as there is in pedagogy, that resembles the striving of Spinoza's conatus: searching rather than solving.

By approaching pedagogy as an open process (Lusted 1986), it helps to instead ask what it does and the interactions of its web of relations (or its various assemblages). Pedagogy is contingent and, again quoting Lusted (1986), "tied to a historical moment defined within the then current state of knowledge" (10). This description puts forth *multiple pedagogies* rather than one absolute pedagogy. Since pedagogy is contextual, there can be a range of pedagogies operating concurrently, from productive to limiting pedagogies. Calling attention to the assumptions that animate these pedagogies enables a constant reworking of relationships and the inequality of power in knowledge-production that is intimately connected to pedagogy, not just between the human subjects of teacher/learner (Ellsworth 1997; Lusted 1986) but also between *things*. The productivity of pedagogy lies in its irresolution.

Sensation: "He Slimed Me!"

Sense in education is the coarse paper and ink flowing across the page while writing, fidgeting in uncomfortable seats, and running on the field, sweat and exhilaration. What does Venkman sense when Slimer flies through him? Disgust is an emotion. What comes before is the sensation. When pedagogy goes through Venkman, what is the emotion, but more to the point: what is the sensation that provokes it?

The feeling body has precedence in educational discourse. John Dewey (1938), for instance, posited the necessity of intention to encourage an educational experience. Similarly, Paulina Rautio (2009) draws our attention to the connection between pedagogy and aesthetic everyday experience. Philosophy and political theory connect sensation and experience, which includes new perspectives to address sensation through inter/intra-object relationality. Despite this important work, sensation remains conflated within experience, feeling, and emotion in education.

Sense is that which provokes. Sensation—and the scholarly exploration of—foregrounds the senses as

an indicator, messenger, communicator, and mode of data. Though related, sensation can be distinguished from feeling and emotion. Sensation is the body: the body that can do its own thing that the mind does not know (Spinoza 1994) and the pre-personal encounter (Merleau-Ponty 2014). Emotion is perception of sensation layered with experience. Deliberately discerning sensation from emotion places the body at the forefront of consideration. This somatic attention allows the concept of what constitutes a body to be explored and reticulated in an “ethico-aesthetic” manner (Massumi 2014, 44). Aesthetic is approached here as the sensorial response to stimulus rather than the formal evaluation of traditional art forms. Integrating ethics into sensation signifies what is at stake in education: the politics of the body, meaning the discursive and practical mechanisms that seek to discipline and control that body.

Sensation as provocation echoes a primary purpose of art to provoke. Untangling sensation from emotion resets the foundational vocabulary to reexamine pedagogy. However, reconceptualizing pedagogy in this way complicates the previous argument of pedagogy as an art. This complication highlights ways that pedagogy’s artistry, as well as sensation, occur as capacious dynamic processes unbidden to replication. Pedagogical sensations can be emulated but not duplicated. Sensations produce diverse paths of educational inquiry from Michalinos Zembylas’ (2005) work on emotional trauma in the classroom to Maggie MacLure’s (2013) scholarship on the affective implications of reversing the researcher-data relationship. MacLure described the sensation of previously completed research data reaching out to provoke a response; consequently, “these sensations can act as catalysts to reticulate approaches to considering educational issues” because “ambiguity edges out assumed control” (Sojot 2019, 114).

The Thingness of Pedagogy: “That’s Great! Actual Physical Contact!”

Pedagogy’s affect can be expressed materially. But these are not the material effects or the things of education, learning, and pedagogy considered traditionally. It is not thinking of the thingness of pedagogy as the actual “things” usually associated with education discourse and practices: books, lesson plans, papers, desks, chalkboards, and various educational objects. These objects are not the same as thingness. However, recent scholarship has significantly started to reconceptualize the relationality of these *things* of education since “they are not merely inert stuff that forms the background for a more important ‘human’ learning experience” (Snaza et

al. 2016, xx). New materialist perspectives present a way to reassert the agency of objects, which has repercussions for how education is enacted.

Slimer relates to pedagogy and sensation if we first approach Slimer as a metaphor for the living force of pedagogy. The dynamic, living interpretation of pedagogy has precedence. Ellsworth (2005) discusses living knowledge as knowledge that one creates for one’s self rather than dead knowledge that someone or *something* (take note, this thing will continue to haunt later) deemed necessary to know—dead, unmoving knowledge. It is inert. While not necessarily bad in itself, the proliferation of practices and discourse that value this type of knowledge above all else presents a problem. This problem is that it takes up the space where other things and ideas and sensations might grow, take root, flourish, or wither away. Intended to be productive and helpful it overextends to the point of obstruction.

As a kind of pedagogical force, Slimer shows how it can travel unbounded—a pedagogy untethered to physical location—yet when Slimer makes contact, Slimer leaves slime or a residue. The residue, or slime, is the physical visualization and realization of the force confronting the senses and the body of the received. In pedagogical terms, the slime would represent the educational experience that a learner has encountered and reflected upon. The encounter demonstrates that what one learns is somatic and not solely cognitive.

Slimer is pedagogy Slimer-fied. Slimer moving is pedagogy in action. The collision of Slimer and wall (thing and object) or Slimer and Venkman (thing and human) is the force of pedagogy making an encounter. If Slimer were not a dynamic force of pedagogy but rather a structurally material “force,” then Slimer would bounce off or be absorbed. However, as a dynamic force, Slimer *affects* and the effect is visualized in slime. Slimer leaves an obvious mark from something that is not generally seen: the affect-slime of the encounter leads to disgust from Venkman and delight from Ray (“Wonderful samples!”). They notice it and engage with the sensation.

As the embodiment of force and affect Slimer is the thingness that provokes sensation. Consider other encounters with this type of learning and teaching that are not so obvious. For Ellsworth (2005), this is encountered with architecture and art installations. For Paulo Freire (1970/1993), this is negatively seen in encounters of inert instruction—more like negative ectoplasm depicted by the villain Vigo in *Ghostbusters II*. For Zembylas (2005), trauma expressed in the classroom is an example of an affective encounter. The encounter

with the static or dynamic leaves a mark. Sometimes this is as tangible as slime, other times it is the whisper of a memory, a smell that lingers...but is still there. And it is waiting to be felt.

The flexibility of thing and thingness is necessary for this exploration because it considers several anomalous things of education. What thingness does is articulate the “more than” of an object. Thingness implies that a type of object is in question but that the materiality and affect of the thing extends beyond its physical form in how it is felt and sensed and in its force. This works in reverse, too. Things that may be seen as a process or force can create a type of tangible thingness, i.e., it leaves a mark. For example, Slimer’s sliminess is its descriptor. Even though it’s all slime, Slimer has other characteristics that make Slimer more than a mobile pile of ectoplasm. Perhaps the thingness incorporates the *affective* qualities of the thing in question. While these affective qualities do not claim to represent final goals of learning due to affect’s evanescence, they can point to conditions of possibility for diverse, ethical, and aesthetic approaches to education. Momentarily fixing the sensation of pedagogy via thingness presents a pause. This pause enables a critical interrogation of those affective qualities. Pedagogy as Slimer is thingness visualized.

Embodiment: “I Feel So Funky.”

Yet what are the philosophical implications of problematizing the subject-object-thing distinction when Slimer’s thingness is taken and subjectivity is imposed? The previous section explored how Slimer’s thingness illustrates a new materialist affective encounter of pedagogical force and the issues Slimer qua Slimer raise regarding subject-object-thing and thinking-feeling. In the first *Ghostbusters*, Slimer is described as a Class 5 Full Roaming Vapor or pure ectoplasm. The 2016 *Ghostbusters* film sought to provide a background story for Slimer’s origin in scenes ultimately not included in the final cut. According to a story from *Wired*, writers developed Slimer’s backstory. In an effort of personification, they establish Slimer as previously human and specifically a violent gangster with a gluttonous appetite and ferocious temper. *Ghostbusters* co-writer and director Paul Feig commented, “To me, ghosts are humans that have died” (Locke 2016). In the backstory, Slimer originally has a humanlike ghost form until the *Ghostbusters* find him—notice that Slimer is now officially gendered—gorging on food. Slimer’s characteristic green hue, shape, and leglessness are the result of the *Ghostbusters* using their untested equipment on him.

Besides this “origin” story being non-continuous with the original film where Slimer is first seen, it highlights shallow uncritical anthropocentrism, which is avoided in new materialism.

The impetus to label Slimer specifically as former human highlights the habit to evaluate things based on degrees of human-ness. The backstory demonstrates universal Humanism’s inherent discomfort with encountering the Other (Braidotti 2013). Slimer can’t just be slime, ectoplasm, a ghost, *a thing*. Slimer is Slimer. Slimer is thingness. Instead of being anthropomorphic to engage others with the thingness of Slimer, exploring the non-human and what that holds for ethically considering other ways of knowing, thinking, and being, the backstory resorts to the comforts of anthropocentrism. Slimer has to be a person, or at least have been a person. Slimer’s thingness creates a sense of unease and of horror. That which cannot-be-explained is therefore cast away and made to be thought of as unnecessary. Explanation becomes associated with cognition, and cognition with knowledge. The brain is the seat of knowledge via cognition. Slimer is no longer an object, a thing, a Class 5 Full Roaming Vapor; instead Slimer is a (gendered) subject, one who was made this way by the fallibility of other humans, which speciously suggests Slimer’s actions and emotions as more “real” and understandable because they originate from a former human.

Conclusion

Do you need a body to feel sensations? Indeed, the above discussion and this paper addresses the central concern of embodiment. New materialism and object-oriented ontologies acknowledge the philosophical problem of disrupting subject-object relationality while remaining within a human consciousness. Exploring these questions in this matter and way is important: one, it recognizes the problem of the body and embodiment specifically from the human perspective, and two, it doesn’t shy away from this limitation or ignore it or attempt to eliminate it once and for all. Instead it works through the question of embodiment. Bennett (2010) asks, “Why are we so keen to distinguish the human self from the field?” (121). An inability to completely “step out” of the human does not negate the responsibility to try to communicate, to understand, and to empathize. Bennett further reflects, “Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman ‘environment’” (120). This

suggests that the humanization of Slimer is unnecessary. Slimer can be slime. While this may be anthropomorphic it is not anthropocentric (Bennett 2010; Bogost 2012; Massumi 2014). By recognizing this, it acknowledges our own conscious or subconscious connections to the human subjective view. Calling out the pretense of subjectivity is a move that is arguably more ethical than claiming omniscient objectivity in practices of education and schooling.

Slimer is used here as a conceptual tool to demonstrate the thingness, or effervescent materiality, of pedagogy. Specific focus on the encounter of Slimer 'hitting' Venkman calls attention to sensation in a moment of learning. Interrogating that sensation reestablishes the significance of the body in producing knowledge. This challenges the emphasis of the mind as the seat of knowing. For example, Venkman perceives Slimer but it is not until the sensation of his encounter with the slime that the knowledge is actualized.

Contemplating Slimer provides a framework to reshape assumptions made in educational discourse and practices. Engaging in this type of conceptual exercise is productive. First, it problematizes subject-object relationality and in doing so presents a potential model to readdress the implications a continued cognitive-somatic dichotomy holds for education. Second, it emphasizes the possibility of open-ended pedagogies to incite wonder through the unforeseen and unpredictable encounter. Some are already taking this initiative by actively creating their own slime. While not ectoplasm, this version of slime is a squishy, oozy substance popular among youth. There are recipes online and a significant community of people who create vastly different forms of slime—the creativity of experimentation. Slime has a tangibility with the experimentation and engages with the senses through touch, sound, smell.

The pedagogical thingness of Slimer underscores the role of the body and sensation in learning and teaching. When the wonder of learning is constricted by demands of efficiency and generalized learning outcomes, the thingness of pedagogy becomes apparent. When one is able to explore their own sensations of knowing as seen in these encounters with slime, the potential of a pedagogy of thingness to transform those constricting practices is felt.

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ENDNOTES

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