Dear First Year Student,

One of the most powerful books I have ever read, first as a university student and, later, as an educator, was Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. First published in Portuguese in 1968 and translated into English in 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has become one of the most important texts in social justice education. Freire’s book taught me to think about education and learning is a new way.

In high school I was an unmotivated, disinterested student. I found it difficult to sit in class after class, listening to teachers recite lists of facts and other information I was expected to write down and memorize for tests. For the most part, I didn’t see the relevance of the information. I lived in Chatham, Ontario, a city very near to Dresden which was the northern end of the Underground Railroad that led slaves from the United States to freedom. I had heard something about this but it was never included in the high school curriculum. I also didn’t learn that Canada had its own system of slavery, a history that is seldom taught in schools. Although Chatham is an industrial town with factories as the main source of employment, I didn’t learn anything about unions or labour rights. My mom was a single parent, raising three girls on her own, working at two jobs because women were paid much less than men and she couldn’t support us on one salary. But none of my teachers talked about gender inequality or the women’s movement. The curriculum I learned had almost nothing to do with my own life, or the lives of the other students in my classes.

Friere would describe my education as the ‘banking’ model, where students are passive recipients of the teacher’s knowledge. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he offers a different view of education, one that ignited the love of learning I had lost through my formal schooling. Based on his experience of teaching poor and illiterate members of Brazilian society to read and write, he developed a problem solving approach to knowledge creation that allows students to be active participants in their learning. Through dialogue, students learn to think critically about important issues in their lives and how to use this knowledge as a tool for social action. Friere calls this an education for liberation.

So, for Friere, education should be an active and transformative process. This is the philosophy I have adopted in my own teaching and one I encourage my students to embrace. In my lecture to first year students during orientation week, I share the words of feminist educator, Adrienne Rich, who drew on Freire’s educational philosophy in her powerful speech, ‘Claiming an Education” which she delivered to students in 1977:

> The first thing I want to say to you who are students, is that you cannot afford to think of being here to receive an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to claim one.

> One of the dictionary definitions of the verb "to claim" is: to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction. "To receive" is to come into possession of; to act as the receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true. The difference is that between acting and being acted-upon...

As you embark on your university career, I urge you to become an actor in your education rather than a passive recipient. My hope is that you will see the transformative power of your academic knowledge and use this knowledge for social justice goals. I see this as the responsibility that comes with learning, and I think Friere would agree.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Professor June Larkin

Equity Studies/Women and Gender Studies