

**LOOK WHO'S LISTENING: USING THE SUPERADDRESSEE FOR
UNDERSTANDING CONNECTIONS IN DIALOGUE**

Warren Midgley

Faculty of Education, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland,
Australia

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of what theories of learning and pedagogy are espoused or adopted, people engaged in any of the activities that might be described broadly as education are required to communicate effectively in order to facilitate the process of learning. This book, *Creating connections in teaching and learning*, seeks to explore ways in which this communication might be improved by creating connections. In this chapter, I explore one way of conceptualizing the process of creating connections, using a bakhtinian concept of the superaddressee.

The *superaddressee* is a theoretical concept drawn from the work of Bakhtin (1981) which posits the necessary existence of a higher level addressee in every dialogic exchange. This other listener is conceptualized as one who is valorized more highly than the speaker and the listener, and who listens sympathetically, and understands justly. I use the unconventional lower case *b* for bakhtinian to emphasize the theoretical stance that I have adopted towards theories drawn from the writings of M. M. Bakhtin (especially Bakhtin 1981, 1986); namely that I have appropriated them as useful concepts for a new context. I do not claim to represent the historical Bakhtin (see Midgley, 2010).

In this chapter, I outline how this concept can help to explain the success of efforts to create connections in dialogue. When both parties in a dialogue are addressing a similar superaddressee, connections are more likely to be created than if the superaddressees are quite different. To begin, I briefly explain the concept of the superaddressee, in the context of the broader bakhtinian concept of dialogue. I then demonstrate the influence of superaddressees by analyzing transcripts from a larger research project which explored the experiences of male Saudi Arabian nursing students at an Australian university. By applying

this concept to an analysis of transcripts from conversations with the students about diversity in education, I demonstrate the operation of superaddressees in dialogue. I conclude by drawing out implications and suggestions for how a theoretical framework, developed around the concept of the superaddressee, might enhance educators' attempts at creating connections with various and diverse stakeholders.

DIALOGUE

Dialogue, as a theoretical concept in the bakhtinian sense, does not simply mean conversation; rather, it refers to a complex relationship that operates on several different levels (Bakhtin, 1981). In its most basically conceived form, it is an engagement between two people who are communicating. This engagement may be localized in time and space (two friends who have met for a chat), or it might be distanced in either time (asynchronous chat-rooms) or space (a telephone conversation), or both. However, dialogic engagement does not always involve the presence of a specific, embodied interlocutor. A novelist may write with a general readership in mind, and likewise a student may write an essay for an unidentified marker. In these instances, the interlocutor is an imagined or idealized person.

The presence of this "indefinite, unconcretized other" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95) is significant, because this interlocutor influences the outcome of the dialogue. For example, I write now for an idealized reader. In my conceptualisation of the way in which my idealized reader responds to the previous point, I sense the need for further explanation. Hence I have included this illustration in an attempt to clarify the point. Whether the person I am speaking or writing to is real or imagined, present or distant in time and space, my dialogue is influenced by the other to whom it is addressed. This concept is referred to as addressivity (Bakhtin, 1986).

SUPERADDRESSEE

One important aspect of addressivity in bakhtinian theory is the theorized existence of a third party, or superaddressee, in dialogue. Whilst my writing or speaking is directed to and influenced by an addressee, it is also at the same time directed to and influenced by a superaddressee. Bakhtin (1986) described this superaddressee as an ideal listener in the mind of the speaker – one who hears from a position above self and other, and who listens sympathetically and understands justly.

Morson and Emerson (1990) suggested that the superaddressee was the embodiment of hope, without which all attempts at dialogue would degenerate into some kind of “special terror” (p. 136). The reason for this lies in the contingent nature of all dialogic encounters: I do not know whether or not you truly understand what I am saying, nor whether you really agree with what I am saying. You may agree with what you think I am saying, but if you have not understood my meaning, then you have not agreed with me. Morson and Emerson noted that, in this discussion, Bakhtin related the need to be heard with the need for God – possibly in the Russian Orthodox tradition, although the exact nature of the religious activities for which Bakhtin was exiled is not known (Clark & Holquist, 1984). Adopting a postmodern perspective, Morson and Emerson argued that the superaddressee should be considered as a metalinguistic fact, rather than as the expression of an ideological or theological belief.

Bryzzheva (2006, 2008) has discussed important implications of the role that the superaddressee – or third listener as she renamed it – plays in providing support for those in threatening situations. In the case she discussed, teachers in classrooms, she argued that teachers may find strength to carry on in difficult situations despite opposition from various

quarters, because they carry with them in their minds an idealized mentor who agrees that what they are doing is right. An example of this might be when the teacher says, “You have to do your homework.” Even if all the students in the classroom disagree, the superaddressee hears and (from his or her superior position of knowledge and understanding) affirms that the teacher is correct. This affirmation would give the teacher support.

The presence of the superaddressee may be clearly observed in the use of sarcasm. For instance, were an embittered acquaintance to say, “It’s about trust, not that you would know what that means,” the speaker is appealing to the superaddressee to acknowledge the veracity and validity of the claim to having been betrayed (an acknowledgement that the listener may be unwilling to make). The fact that the speaker articulates a view that he/she knows the listener will not necessarily agree with can be seen to be evidence of the operation of a superaddressee in dialogue. The form of the utterance suggests that the speaker is addressing the listener, whereas the content of the utterance suggests that the speaker is addressing a superaddressee, who is somehow above or beyond the listener. This concept is diagrammatically represented in Figure 12.1.

INSERT FIGURE 12.1 ABOUT HERE

The superaddressee can be conceptualized as an actual transcendent being, or as a metalinguistic property of dialogue. In either case, exploring the role of the superaddressee in dialogue can provide useful insights into the way in which connections between interlocutors are created. In the following section, I demonstrate this potential in a brief analysis of interview data. Following that, I outline suggestions for how the theoretical construct of the superaddressee might be further employed as a strategy for creating connections.

THE SUPERADDRESSEE AT WORK

In a larger study investigating the experiences of male Saudi Arabian students at an Australian university, I recorded discussions with several small groups of Saudi participants. These discussions were open-ended conversations, which arose from a general prompt question – “Tell me about your experiences here.” I transcribed the recordings for analysis.

The data below are excerpts from the transcript of one episode in one discussion in which two Saudi Arabian students – Wadi and Halim (both pseudonyms) – and I discussed cultural differences. To make the transcript easier to follow, I have removed back-channeling comments and repeated or grammatically unnecessary words (replacing the latter two with ellipsis marks) from the data. I have not used capital letters at the beginning of turns or full-stops at the end of turns because, in a free flowing conversation, sentences are often incomplete. However, I have used capital letters and full stops within longer turns in an attempt to represent the sentential intonation used by the speaker.

The data are analyzed through the theoretical lens I have called bakhtinian discourse analysis (see Midgley, 2010). This approach focuses on the utterance as the unit of analysis. An utterance is a turn in a dialogic encounter which is contingent upon the immediate content of dialogue, the context of previous encounters with the utterances employed in the dialogue, and the utterances which are anticipated in some possible future response. Another distinctive of this bakhtinian approach is that specific bakhtinian concepts (such as the superaddressee) are used as lenses (Chase, 2005), to interpret the dialogic construction of meaning (Dop, 2000). Thus, in the analysis that follows, I read the transcript from my emic position

(Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001), as one of those engaged in the dialogue, and looking for the influence of superaddressees.

The data are broken into three excerpts, all from the same part of one conversation. In the first excerpt, Wadi begins by talking about something that he had recently been taught in a class on communication skills – that cultural differences are not bad, just different.

Excerpt 1

Wadi: I'm involved in one course ... now and that's about ... communications skills, and I find that's very good for students. They teach ... about ... other cultures. So they told them that if you ... see somebody doing anything [emphatic tone] don't think that's bad. No, it's their culture. You cannot say that's better than ... our culture. It's different. Totally different

Wadi's assertion, that cultural differences are neither good nor bad, is supported by what he had been taught in class, which I have discussed elsewhere as explicit authoritative discourse (see Midgley, 2010). This kind of discourse involves a version of truth that demands to be accepted as truth on the basis of the authority behind the truth claim. The authority behind this truth claim is the teacher as expert. This is evident in expressions such as "they teach" and "they told them."

Following on from this conversation about cultural differences, Wadi talks about his impression that Australian people do not like to talk to strangers. He gives as an example the fact that his homestay family and their neighbours do not communicate. (Excerpt 2 begins 34

turns after the end of Excerpt 1, counting back-channeling. The turns in Excerpt 2 and 3 are numbered to facilitate discussion).

Excerpt 2

- 1 Wadi: the homestay I live with ... have neighbours, and they said, “We don’t know anything about them.” They are their neighbours since ten years or more than ten years
- 2 Me: more than ten years? [incredulous tone]
- 3 Wadi: yes [emphatic] and they don’t know anything about their neighbours
- 4 Me: hmm and that’s very strange?
- 5 Wadi: yeah. Totally different. You know, I’m living in my house I have to know all the neighbours. I have to communicate with them. I have to invite them. If somebody sick I have to visit them. If somebody want anything, I have to help. That’s the difference. But here no it’s different totally different

Wadi’s emphatic “yes” and the repetition of the assertion that the members of his homestay family do not know anything about their neighbours (turn 3) express a degree of negative evaluation of the situation. The “different” (underlined in turn 5) is used by Wadi as a synonym for my “strange” of the previous turn (turn 4). This “different,” repeated twice by Wadi in turn 5, has another meaning from the “different” used by Wadi in Excerpt 1. To simplify, I have called the “different” in Excerpt 1 *different (neutral)* and I have called the “different” in Excerpt 2 *different (negative)*.

The degree of negativity in the evaluation expressed by the *different (negative)* remark is difficult for me to determine. It may simply have been “I don’t understand” or “I find it hard

to believe,” or it may have been more judgmental (different = bad). Whichever it was, this use of the word “different” was not the same as its earlier usage in Excerpt 1, and this is further evidenced by the fact that, at the end of Excerpt 2, Wadi seems to become aware of the disjuncture himself. Before anybody else takes a turn, he attempts to negotiate a self-repair (numbering continues from Excerpt 2):

Excerpt 3

- 5 Wadi: that’s their culture I cannot say anything
6 Me: (laugh) it is [emphatic tone] different you can say that
7 Wadi: it’s different
8 Halim: different, yeah
9 Wadi: I can’t say it’s bad or good or no. It’s different

Half way through turn 5 (between Excerpt 2 and Excerpt 3), Wadi attempts to revert to the previous discourse with the words “I cannot say anything.” Picking up on this cue for a switch, I laughed. I interpret this laugh as my acknowledgement that we – Wadi and I – had both strayed from the parameters of the *different (neutral)* explicit authoritative discourse of the earlier discussion. We had done what the teacher had taught Wadi we must not do. Although it was Wadi’s story, as a participant in the dialogue I co-operated in the operation of the other *different (negative)* discourse, both with affirming backchanneling and through tone. My laugh was a non-linguistic way of saying, “We’ve been caught out.” I then affirmed Wadi’s switch by re-introducing the word “different” from Wadi’s earlier recount of the *different (neutral)* discourse. Both Wadi and Halim joined in this dialogic move, with the almost mantra-like repetition of the word “different.”

This episode highlights an intriguing question: How is it that the same people in the same place in the middle of the same conversation can accept something as true, then act (in speaking) as though it were not true, and then come back to affirm it as true again? In this episode, it is clear that Wadi, Halim and I affirm our acceptance of the explicit authoritative discourse that cultural differences are not good or bad, just different. However, shortly thereafter, we begin a discussion which seems to indicate we do not believe it to be true. In the middle of that discussion, we all “correct” ourselves and re-affirm the teaching as true.

This dialogic behaviour can be explained using the concept of the superaddressee. I would suggest that, for some reason in the middle of turn 5, Wadi suddenly remembered that our conversation was being recorded for my research, or (in a similar vein) that I was not just a friend having a chat, but a researcher collecting data. Throughout Excerpt 2, Wadi and I were speaking in the presence of a superaddressee who agreed that never speaking with your neighbours was strange, incomprehensible or wrong; that is to say *different (negative)*. In the middle of turn 5, another superaddressee became powerfully present in our conversation, and hence, like schoolchildren caught whispering in the corner, we quickly reverted back to what we were supposed to be talking about.

It is interesting to reflect upon the character of the superaddressee that was present throughout Excerpt 2. Clearly, the superaddressee agrees with Wadi and me that it is strange for neighbours to not talk to each other. However, it is unlikely that we had exactly the same superaddressee in mind. In the course of this very episode, Wadi explained the importance of maintaining close relationships with neighbours in Saudi Arabia, so it is reasonable to presume that Wadi had in mind a Saudi superaddressee, or at least a superaddressee who was familiar with and sympathetic to Saudi customs.

At the time of this discussion, I was completely unfamiliar with Saudi customs regarding neighbourly relationships. Therefore, we were not addressing exactly the same superaddressee. However, I had spent twelve of the thirteen years prior to this discussion living in Japan where maintaining strong relationships with neighbours is also highly valued. My superaddressee (who agreed with us both that it was strange for neighbours to know nothing about each other) was more likely to have been Japanese or someone familiar with and sympathetic to Japanese customs.

Japanese and Saudi customs are, of course, quite different in many respects. However, in this respect (neighbourly relations), they appear to be similar, and therefore Wadi and I were able to speak to different superaddressees and still come to agreement. Whilst Wadi and I may not agree on many issues, as we continue to seek mutually agreeable superaddressees (which are not exactly the same, but do have some points of agreement), we may be better able to achieve the goal of getting to know one another.

IMPORTANCE FOR CREATING CONNECTIONS

The influence of powerfully present superaddressees in dialogue suggests important implications for educators seeking to create connections with various and diverse stakeholders. The examples given in this section are illustrations that represent possible applications of the theoretical concept of the superaddressee. They have not been empirically tested; rather, they have been extrapolated from the theory and data analysis outlined in the previous section.

The possible usefulness of understanding the concept of superaddressees for creating connections may be seen in the following hypothetical case. A teacher may explain the objectives of a learning activity to another teacher in terms of raising awareness. It may be that both teachers are addressing a superaddressee who advocates critical pedagogy, and therefore, for both of these teachers, the term *raising awareness* calls up theories, beliefs and values about which they share a common understanding. They may have different beliefs about the relative value of the theories or their applications to a specific context, but at least they are talking about more or less the same thing. A connection has been created through a common superaddressee.

However, if the same teacher attempts the same conversation with a parent who is unaware of theories relating to critical pedagogy, then it is less likely that the same type of connection will be made. The term *raising awareness* may carry for the teacher deep and significant social justice implications; whereas, for the parent, it may imply learning the things their children need to know. The teacher and parent may continue to talk at cross-purposes because, whilst they appear to be talking to each other about the same thing, they are actually talking to quite different people (superaddressees) about quite different things. Indeed, it is possible that both parties in this conversation could come away thinking that they are in agreement, when in fact there has been very little cognitive or conceptual connection at all.

Speaking in the presence of similar superaddressees, therefore, can be conceptualized as a mechanism for creating connections in dialogue (see also Midgley, Henderson, & Danaher, 2010). This does not necessarily mean that the two parties in the dialogue agree on everything; however, with similar superaddressees, the two parties stand a better chance of connecting on the basis of having a mutual understanding of the parameters of the dialogue

and a common understanding of the concepts and terms being used. Likewise, speaking in the presence of superaddressees who are very dissimilar would tend to work against creating connections at a deeper level of understanding.

In order to use the concept of the superaddressee for effectively creating connections in dialogue, at least three possible applications suggest themselves. One is *listening for superaddressees*. This means that, as the listener/reader, we be attentive to cues in our interlocutor's utterances which indicate the kind of superaddressee who may be present. For example, the use of the word *conscientization* may indicate a superaddressee who advocates critical pedagogy as conceptualized by Freire (1970, 1970/1998). The use of other terms that are commonly used in discussions on critical pedagogy, such as *cultural action*, would further suggest the presence of such a superaddressee. Other cues to be attentive to might include making reference to the names of specific theories, experts, belief systems, and so on. Noticing these cues may provide insight into the superaddressee to whom our interlocutor is speaking.

If we are able to identify the kind of superaddressee that is present in our interlocutor's mind, and we have some knowledge of a similar superaddressee, theoretically we would have a better chance to connect on the basis of common understandings. One way of reinforcing this connection is by *acknowledging superaddressees*. This may simply be through affirming backchanneling ("yes," "I know," "uh-huh" etc) or it may be more proactively enacted through the use of aligned cues. In the example above, my interlocutor may talk about conscientization and I may respond with the words "yes, some a kind of cultural action." If indeed my interlocutor is speaking in the presence of a superaddressee who endorses cultural pedagogy, then this kind of statement will affirm the presence of similar superaddressees.

The third process that might be employed in helping to create connections is *calling upon superaddressees*. This is perhaps the most difficult, because it requires some degree of guesswork as to which superaddressees might be potentially present in the thought worlds of our interlocutor. In this process, I as speaker would proactively employ cues such as key terms in such a way as to invite a common (or similar) superaddressee to join the dialogue. If my interlocutor is able to read the cues and is also willing to call upon a similar superaddressee, we can then engage in dialogue with some degree of shared understanding. Theoretically, this would also increase the chances of effectively creating connections in dialogue.

These three suggestions have arisen out of my reflections upon the role of the superaddressee as a theoretical concept, and also in the data analysis I have outlined in this chapter. I am not aware of any study that has sought to test the viability or usefulness of these approaches to effectively create connections, although the analysis and discussion summarized in this chapter suggest to me that this would be a useful area for further research.

CONCLUSION

In order to engage effectively with the various stakeholders involved in education and education research, creating connections in dialogue is essential. One mechanism for supporting and enhancing these connections is through being mindful of the presence and influence of superaddressees. The analysis of the data presented in this chapter points to the significant influence that superaddressees can play in dialogue. Understanding the significance of mutually recognizable and acceptable superaddressees may help overcome communication breakdowns and enhance the degree of common understanding that can be

achieved in dialogue. Three processes have been suggested as ways to attempt to employ that understanding to improve dialogue. These are listening for superaddressees, acknowledging superaddressees, and calling upon superaddressees. Proactively employing these processes in dialogues may help in the process of creating connections more effectively.

REFERENCES

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays* (M. Holquist & C. Emerson, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bryzheva, L. (2006). Superaddressee or who will succeed a mentor? *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 25(3), 227-243.

Bryzheva, L. (2008). Who watches over a teacher? On knowing and honoring a teacher and her third listener. *Educational Studies*, 43(3), 175-187.

Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 651-680). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Clark, K., & Holquist, M. (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dop, E. (2000). A dialogic epistemology: Bakhtin on truth and meaning. *Dialogism: An International Journal of Bakhtin Studies* 4, 7-34.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Seabury Press.

Freire, P. (1970/1998). Cultural action for freedom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68(4), 471-521.

Midgley, W. (2010). *Seeking to understand the experiences of male Saudi Arabian nursing students at an Australian university*. Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia.

Midgley, W., Henderson, R., & Danaher, P. A. (2010). Seeking superaddressees: Research collaboration in a doctoral supervisory relationship. In C. Arden, P. A. Danaher, L. De George-Walker, R. Henderson, W. Midgley, K. Noble, M. A. Tyler (Eds.), *Sustaining synergies: Collaborative research and researching collaboration* (pp. 87-102). Upper Mt Gravatt, Qld: Post Pressed.

Morson, G. S., & Emerson, C. (1990). *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a prosaics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Whittemore, R., Chase, S. K., & Mandle, C. L. (2001). Validity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 11(4), 522-537.

Figure 1: The superaddressee