

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Pedagogies of Mattering: Rethinking Relational Pedagogies in Higher Education

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Abstract:

This conceptual paper builds on and extends current framings of relational pedagogies in Higher Education. Using a posthuman, feminist materialist theoretical perspective, grounded in instances of our own practice, it offers a renewed focus on the significance of student-teacher relationships and reconnections as a counterview to an *uncaring* HE system. Current conceptions of staff-student relations continue to rely on cognitivist and humanist traditions that fail to consider how pedagogic relationships are affectively and materially entangled with spaces, places, and environments. We argue that a conceptual shift towards pedagogies of mattering enables both a broadening and a rethinking of relational pedagogies which helps us account in new ways for three key dimensions of HE pedagogies: curriculum; teaching and learning; and assessment. We draw on our experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic to draw out how pedagogies of mattering can suggest a novel ethical theory-practice of meaningful relationships and connections in HE.

Paper:

There has been renewed emphasis in HE on the significance of relationships and care within learning and teaching as a means to offer a counter-view to an *uncaring* marketized, performative and individualising system (e.g. Bovill 2020; Felten and Lambert 2020; Barnacle and Dall'Alba 2017; Burke and Larmer 2020; Kinchin 2019). This focus has intensified during the long periods of physical staff-student isolation following the Covid-19 pandemic, with the shift from campus and seminar room to connection via computer screen and virtually. This shift has brought to the fore in much sharper ways the significance of relationships and engagements between students and staff and how they matter for pedagogy and flourishing and living more broadly. We suggest that current discussions and theoretical underpinnings surrounding relational pedagogies and connections between students and staff continue to rely on cognitivist traditions that focus solely on human experience. In this paper we offer a new conceptualisation of relational pedagogies which we call pedagogies of mattering. Taking up a posthuman and feminist materialist theoretical perspective, and grounded in illustrative instances from our practice, we propose pedagogies of mattering as a more conceptually holistic approach to accounting for how pedagogic relations and connections act in concert as vital players with objects, bodies and spaces. Pedagogies of mattering make a decisive shift so that we might consider in more nuanced ways how pedagogic relationships are affectively and materially entangled with spaces, places, and environments.

Posthumanist and feminist materialist theorisations are still relatively new in the field of higher education. However, those using these novel theorisations illuminate how they offer the potential to recast subjectivity, agency, relations and ethics and open new ways of thinking relatedness and connection (Fairchild 2020; Gravett 2020; Taylor 2019; Quinn 2021). Posthuman and feminist materialist theories can provide routes for thinking differently about knowledge and knowing: they challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about humanist research protocols; and open up methodological space for creativity and invention. Gourlay (2021, 11) notes that posthumanist approaches are no longer positioned on the 'wild fringes' of educational research but are now much more widely seen to offer teachers and researchers a breadth of both useful and necessary ideas. We consider how the posthuman-inflected theories of Donna Haraway (1988, 1997), Rosi Braidotti (2013), and Karen Barad (2007) provide the grounds for positioning care and response-ability as a central feature in an expanded conceptualisation of relational pedagogies.

Theory is put to work through examples from our experiences as educators across three key areas of teaching in higher education: curriculum; teaching and learning; and assessment. These examples enable us to ask new questions about these key areas including: who and what matters in curricula? How do classroom resources, texts and teaching materials contribute to the reification or marginalisation of bodies and the normalisation of whose voices matter? How does learning materialise in virtual-real spaces and what comes to matter when we attend to those often unnoticed practices of entangled relationality? Attending to the materialities of learning enables us to understand the student and educator as situated within a relational field and focuses attention on learning intra-actions as modes of 'sticky' materiality. Posthumanism and feminist materialisms can, we suggest, lead to more nuanced understandings of how pedagogies might be enacted in more relational, ethical and transformative ways.

Pedagogies of mattering enable us to bring new and necessary attention to the question: who and what matters within relational pedagogies? This question pushes us to think differently about relational pedagogies to enable us to pay more attention to how mattering and materiality in HE impacts upon us and our everyday practices as educators. Entangled as teaching and learning relations are with matters of power, pedagogies of mattering require us to pay detailed consideration to the production of inequalities through the micro, everyday and ongoing relations of bodies, objects, spaces and materialities – and also, more broadly, how these micro instances are shaped by, and connect to, structural and social injustices. Paying closer attention to these micro-macro entanglements may, we hope, enable us to cast a keener eye on not just seeing but addressing the inequalities which pervade student-staff relations and institutions.

This paper ends with suggestions for new directions for theory-practice in considerations of pedagogy, curriculum, learning and assessment. In this we build on the important work already being done in higher education pedagogies (see the edited collection by Taylor, 2019; Taylor & Bayley; Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2018; Gravett 2020; Gravett and Ajjawi 2021). We suggest pedagogies of mattering can foster closer, more caring and ethical ways of working with students by encouraging us to see our institutions and learning spaces anew: as assemblages where heterogeneous bodies, human and nonhuman, social, material, connect and interact and in which, through their continuous flux, positive change can take hold.

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