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How relational are relational pedagogies? Restricted and extended conceptualisations of 'relationality' and 'pedagogy'

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in 'relational pedagogies' in English-language higher education scholarship and practitioner-oriented publications. In particular, relational pedagogies are seen as offering a corrective to the effects of a marketized (higher) education sector and, more generally, to socio-cultural anxieties and prejudices relating to difference and extractive, exploitative orientations to the world. The roots of relational pedagogies can be traced to classical Greek philosophy and draw in ethical, as well as epistemological and ontological dimensions. Yet in practice, much relational pedagogies literature adopts a reductive concept of 'relationality' as '(teacher) relatability' and there is a tendency to treat complex concepts such as 'inclusion' as givens. This paper reports on a review of literature, showing how more expansive conceptions of relationality and pedagogy which acknowledge the social and communal aspects of knowledge and higher education can help develop specifically educational ways of understanding and improving experiences, practices and outcomes.

Full paper

The paper will present findings of a review of literature on relational pedagogies, which are strongly associated by relational pedagogies advocates with inclusion, democratic values and social justice. It forms part of a larger project exploring conditions which are conducive to developing and sustaining inclusive pedagogies in a UK higher education institution.

Scholarly surveys trace the origins of relational pedagogies to classical Greek philosophy (Hinsdale & Ljungblad 2023). From the turn of this century, the term comes into explicit use among educators and researchers seeking for a corrective to the effects of marketisation on schooling and higher education. The introduction to an influential edited volume sets out a manifesto for a specifically educational response to 'logic borrowed from the world of business' (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, p. 2) which seeks to effect 'reforms' in compulsory education through a narrow focus on 'what works', 'excellence' and accountability through

high-stakes assessment. Authors of a more recent edited volume describe relational pedagogies as offering 'theoretical perspectives which may open up new possibilities and provocations' (Bozalek et al, 2018, p. 1) for counteracting   what are perceived as broader socio-cultural and economic effects of neoliberalism, including anxieties and prejudices relating to difference and a more general 'political swing to the right' (Bozalek et al, 2018, p. 1). Both volumes assert that 'relationality is not an ethical value' (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, p. 7), but rather 'the entanglement of ontology (being), epistemology (knowing), politics and ethics' (Bozalek et al, 2018, p. 101). They argue that a particular contribution of relational pedagogies is a sensibility for the power relations which are inherent in relations (personal, social and educational) and for the socio-cultural-historical factors which condition present experience, identities, behaviours and self-concepts. Both volumes include case studies which explicitly address the tensions, complexities and challenges encountered by individual teachers and their students, with analysis of contextual factors.

An initial search of English-language higher education scholarly journals published after 2000, including both reports of empirical research, opinion pieces and publications aimed at staff who teach / support learning in higher education, confirms the salience of ethical and political values as counterpoints to 'a growing sense of disenfranchisement with a marketized higher education environment' (Bovill, 2020, p. 7). There is convergence on describing relational pedagogies as positioning 'meaningful relations as fundamental to effective learning and teaching and explor[ing] ways of fostering connections, authenticity and responsiveness' (Gravett et al, 2021, p. 392; see also Bovill 2020) and 'belonging' (Su & Wood, 2023, p. 231; also Bell, 2022, p. 499). There are some associations between relational pedagogies and 'recent calls in the UK to decolonise the curriculum, which questions the apparent neutrality of curricula' (Gravett et al, 2021, p. 393).

As Gravett (2023) observes, however, there is a tendency towards individualistic, cognitivist assumptions about knowledge, education and learning. 'Student learning', for example, is framed in terms of 'effectiveness' and 'improved understanding' and relationality is often constructed in restrictive terms as 'interpersonal relations'. A relatively small number of publications included in the initial review acknowledge that a focus on 'the teacher' omits consideration of factors which may influence individual practice, such as institutional cultures and expectations, or resourcing. Nevertheless, even within these publications, much of the focus is firmly on 'the teacher', foregrounding traits and practices which demonstrate approachability. Students mainly come into focus through interactions with 'the teacher', and the social dimension of learning and teaching is largely absent. There is relatively little consideration of students in interaction with each other, or of the complexities of pedagogical practice. Despite clear concern within this literature at the effects of marketisation on how students and staff experience higher education, there are also paradoxically traces of neoliberal discourses and logics: for example relational pedagogies are claimed to be associated with increased student satisfaction, improved recruitment and institutional income.

Findings of the initial review of literature indicate significant variation in explicit or implicit theoretical positions, for example on 'knowledge' and 'learning', and these seem to be associated with restricted or extended conceptualisations of 'pedagogy'. Building on the insight that problems arise, for researchers and for practitioners, from treating philosophically contested and / or complex values such as 'inclusion' as 'givens' (Stentiford & Koutsouris 2021), the paper will present findings of an analysis of relational pedagogies literature using expanded conceptions of relationality and of pedagogy. These attend to the distinctly social nature of education, knowledge and learning, bringing into focus tensions and dilemmas as well as more sustainable ways of improving experiences, practices and outcomes