Serial number	0338
Title	Rethinking Higher Education in Posthuman Times
Submitter	Prof. Carol Taylor, Prof. Christina Hughes

Part 1 Abstract

The purpose of this discussion group is to explore what posthumanist theory has to offer higher education research, pedagogy and practice. Braidotti (2013: 2) suggests that the *post-human* condition is already with us and has introduced a 'qualitative shift' in our thinking about what 'the basic unit of common reference is for our species, our polity and our relationships'. The discussion is structured into three parts. In the first part, two original research papers by Author 1 and Author 2 will be used as a basis for considering the ontological, epistemological and ethical presumptions of posthumanism. The second part will be organized around a set of theoretical provocations which aim to engage participants in re-thinking questions about *who/what matters and what/who counts* in relation to practical issues of teacher-student relations; curriculum design and pedagogy; and learning spaces. The third part will consider the implications of posthumanism for educational research.

Part 2 Outline

This session offers an accessible introduction to posthumanist theory, outlines its key ontological, epistemological and ethical presumptions, and engages participants in a consideration of its radical implications for re-thinking higher education. It will provide: 1) an introduction to the key ideas of posthumanism; 2) a series of theoretical prompts to open up discussions about how to put posthumanism to work to rethink higher education curriculum, pedagogy and practice; and 3) an informed opportunity to consider what posthumanist theory has to offer higher education research.

Posthumanism is a mobile term, a constellation of theories, concepts, approaches and practices. While there are many posthumanisms, it is nevertheless the case that posthumanist approaches share some common features, the most central of which is a questioning of human exceptionalism, that is, the presumption that 'we' humans are separate from and superior to nature and nonhuman animals. In posthumanist thinking, then, 'man' is decentered and a different starting point for understanding being (ontology), knowing (epistemology) and ethics is proposed. In short, by including the nonhuman, the other-than-human and the more-than-human, posthumanist thinking fundamentally shifts questions about *who matters and what counts* in the world. Furthermore, the process of questioning anthropocentric assumptions of speciesism – that is, of human superiority over nonhuman 'others' – is allied to the posthuman imperative to question humanist systems and practices which uphold the domination of some humans (white, male, Western) over 'other' humans and the unjust legacies this leads to through, for example, practices such as colonialism, racism, ecological depredation, and the privileging of scientific forms of knowledge over other ways of knowing. Instead of the binaries and hierarchies of humanism, posthumanism proposes an ethic of entanglement, based in a flattened ontology of mutual relation, and makes an ontological shift from a consciousness-based, cognitive, interiorized, phenomenological view of experience (as Descartes proposed) to a materialist, relational, affective, vitalist, and corporeal notion of experience. Posthumanists argue that an ontology of mutual relation enables a more affirmative view of life as an ecological human/nonhuman continuum.

It will be obvious from this general introduction that posthumanism proposes different starting points for educational research and new ways of grasping educational experience than that afforded by humanism. Posthumanist approaches to higher education research, pedagogy and practice are radical, experimental, and transdisciplinary; they are oriented to more ecological modes of relational being, and to generative ways of producing knowledge as an entangled ethico-onto-epistemology.

In the **first part of the discussion group** two original research papers will be presented:

Paper 1 Diffracting the Curriculum
This paper focuses on Karen Barad's elaboration of agential realism in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). In that book, Barad introduced a way of thinking about the relations between matter and discourse as a mode of performative posthumanism, and a range of concepts – intra-action, cut, entanglement, phenomena – to understand those relations. This has been incredibly generative for feminist educationalists across the sectors and in a range of national contexts (Author 1 and Other, 2013) but, as yet, little use has been made of Barad's agential realism in studies of higher education curricula.

This paper focuses on an undergraduate BA Education Studies module, in a UK university and utilizes Barad's (2007: 29–30) notion of diffraction – that is, an attention to how 'different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter' – to illuminate how curriculum-making can be done via activities of creative interference. The paper illuminates the usefulness of posthumanist approach in exploring the situated particularities in students' experiences of the higher education curriculum, and points to how posthumanist approaches provide some generative tools to speak back to the discourses of commoditization and individualization which mark the current higher education landscape.

Paper 2: Diffracting Student Engagement
This paper considers how we might methodologically develop the analytic technique of diffraction. Diffraction challenges the dominance of reflexivity as a primary way of knowing. This is because, as reflexive mirror images tell us, reflexivity produces the same displaced elsewhere. And whilst reflexive awareness enables us to more fully understand our embeddedness (though not necessarily our entanglement) in research relations and outcomes, it maintains the hierarchy of a 'God eye view' of the world by a human agent. In contrast diffraction is concerned with understanding the differentiating effects of waves of power through an examination of interference patterns, and thus calls on us to think of the patterning in our analytic data in alternative ways.

Drawing on work by Author 2 (Author 2 and Other, 2013), this paper takes a diffractive lens to student engagement. It considers how the cuts we make in our data, commonly and ordinarily, create new borders and new articulations between analytic strands. It provides a number of alternative patternings – fractal, knotting, contrasting – to explore how these might undermine knowledge claims. Importantly, however, diffraction is not a relative methodology. As Neimans (2017: 62) remarks 'a posthuman method can no more easily escape the situatedness of the practitioner' as any other approach – so the differences of 'race' class, gender, ability and so forth 'need to be specifically traced, not eradicated'.

Part 2 of the discussion group offers a series of theoretical provocations enabling participants to explore the ways posthumanist approaches contest humanist assumptions,

methodologies and procedures and where this may take us in terms of producing knowledge about higher education.

Part three builds out from examples in our co-edited text *Posthuman Research Practices in Education* to discuss how posthumanist research recasts methodology and the empirical. We show how this recasting provides novel modes of doing research and generates new insights into higher educational experience.

For Braidotti (2013: 48), a posthuman approach 'requires … the rejection of self-centred individualism [and] produces a new way of combining self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged community'. For Barad (2007: 142) a posthuman/ new materialist ethics focuses on the 'dynamism of becoming' which emerges through 'specific material reconfigurings of the world'. This discussion group offers a practical grounding in using posthumanist theory to develop different ways of thinking about and doing higher education in posthuman times.

References

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.* London: Duke University Press.
Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity.
Author 2 and Other (2013). (Re)-Turning Feminist Methodologies: From a Social to an Ecological Epistemology, *Gender and Education*, 25(6), 786–799.
Author 1 and Other (2013). Material feminisms: New directions for education. *Gender and Education*, *25*(6), 665– 670.
Author 1 and Author 2 (2016). *Posthuman Research Practices in Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.