BOOK REVIEW

Posthumanism and Higher Education: Reimagining Pedagogy, Practice and Research

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Posthumanism and Higher Education: Reimagining Pedagogy, Practice and Research

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This book brings forward a rich and engaging panoply of posthuman perspectives on higher education. These contributions challenge the notion of the static, independent and autonomous human subject in education. The authors question the central role of the human in our thinking about higher education, encouraging us to consider the agency of complex assemblages of human and non-human beings, technologies and ecologies. The separation of mind and body, nature and culture are dismissed. These viewpoints underpin ethical stances that challenge neoliberal perspectives on higher education and ask us to embrace relational and interconnected values as fundamental to our work as educators. The authors lead us towards pedagogies and research methods that embrace uncertainty and complexity and reject fixed processes and predictable outcomes. These are excellent foils to risk adverse perspectives on higher education fixated on quantitatively measurable outcomes.

I found this book to be thought provoking, inspiring and yet deeply frustrating at times. The inspiration came from reading authors bold and brave enough to stay with troubling topics such as higher education in the context of climate and ecological crises. What I found thought provoking and fascinating was how perspectives that decentre the human can raise new possibilities for theory and practice in relation to such troubled times. One frustrating element for me was how difficult some of the chapters were to understand. Perhaps I should have expected this given that I have less experience of reading posthuman literature than of some other theoretical perspectives? Even reading very closely - and stopping to read more of Donna Haraway part way through this book - I still found some sections incomprehensible. While I see the importance of disrupting academic conventions to convey novel perspectives, the combination of newly invented vocabulary, splitting of familiar words to give new meaning and shifting genres was just too much for me in places. If this text is only for specialists in posthumanism that may not matter but if the intention is to draw in a wider audience, then I think more attention needed to be given to readability.

At a few points, I was also frustrated by bold claims that seemed to have no warrant or explanation. I also felt that a few of the authors set up unfair and overly simplistic representations of other views on education in order to critique them. The idea that higher education is still often understood as transmitting and banking knowledge was one of these. I

have not encountered anyone in recent years who thinks about higher education in these terms. In contrast with this, I very much appreciated the way in which Lesley Gourlay, in chapter 14, demonstrated how posthumanist perspectives could be used to go beyond other traditions while acknowledging the learning from the work that had gone before.

One of the particularly inspiring chapters for me was chapter 13 by Kay Sidebottom. Kay recounts the pedagogical practice of asking student teachers to work over time to make three dimensional maps of the entanglements that were significant to their emerging practice, using a mix of materials to symbolise this. This experimental, disruptive and co-constructed learning experience gave the students opportunities to experience the enmeshed nature of their emergent becoming. This in turn can encourage in students a wider sense of thoughtful noticing of who and what are part of their becoming and what voices might have gone unnoticed. The hope is that this contributes to a praxis of care in a troubled world.

Overall, I would recommend this book if you might want to radically rethink your research and practice in higher education. Just be prepared to wrestle with it and read around it to make good use of the ideas.