



BOOK REVIEW

Towards a posthuman theory of educational relationality

Simon Ceder

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In this book, based on his doctoral thesis, Simon Ceder sets out to articulate a posthuman theory of educational relationality and develop concepts that will be of use to researchers, students and teachers engaged in thinking with education from posthuman perspectives. Ceder's approach is firmly theoretical, and he admits himself that moving from philosophical considerations to applying the ideas in the classroom is hard, as "[t]here is no available language for studying relationality and my mind is impregnated with individualistic and entity-based ideas" (p.7). While some readers will feel that Ceder provides limited linkages to specific educational practices, the clarity of language and ideas presented may prove to be a valuable enabler for others to move this work forward, and the book's structure ensures a readable but comprehensive mapping of his research process.

Ceder's starting point is a generative critique of humanist, intersubjective models of educational relations. He states that "[e]ven though education is a processual science, many researchers find their points of departure not in the processes, but in stable entities existing before and after the process" (p.7) working from the assumption that the goal of education is the transformation of the student through relations with other human subjects. This way of looking at things is incompatible with posthuman ways of understanding the world, and Ceder proposes *educational relationality* as a more appropriate alternative. Before laying out his own framework for this, he chooses an assertive route through three dominant approaches to understanding educational relations and their humanist foundations. For Ceder, there are two core problems with these: anthropocentrism and subject-centrism.

One of the aspects of posthuman theory that I find most productive is the ability to read (sometimes apparently dissonant) ideas, theories and materials diffractively through one another in order to generate situated understanding. Ceder's diffractive response to intersubjective educational relations wraps around two central strands: the concept of intra-relationality and an associated post-anthropocentric vision of how this applies to education. *Intra-relationality* is an entanglement of Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action (where agency is not attributed to pre-existing individual people/things, but situated in dynamic becoming) and Biesta's work which emphasises the event of relationality, rather than the entities in relation, as the foundation of becoming. In order to decentre the human in this process Ceder proposes five co-concepts (principally from reading Barad, Biesta, Braidotti, Levinas, Lenz-

Taguchi and Todd through one another) which allow for a flattened understanding of what 'matters' in education.

The first of these co-concepts, *impermanence* is a translation of the Buddhist mark of existence *annica*, and serves to move away from the idea of 'becoming' as movement between fixed states, towards an understanding of the world in constant movement. This challenges the concepts of uniqueness in intersubjective educational relations, such as Levinas's 'uniqueness-as-irreplaceability' (Biesta, 2010). Ceder argues that if, from a posthuman perspective, we exist in flux and intra-action, we are constantly being replaced and an understanding of *uniqueness-as-relationality* is required. The third co-concept, *proximity*, "involves the sensation of being close in relationality with an emphasis on ethics and materiality" (p.77), and makes links between the way that Levinas's work has been previously applied to education and Barad's (2007) 'ethico-onto-epistemology'.

Ceder acknowledges that these elements make it challenging to locate where, how and for whom education and learning happens. As such, he proposes using the term *edu-activities* as "agential relationality with an educational purpose which has intention and direction" (p.91), working in terms of absolute movement, rather than relative movement (Springgay, 2015). While this co-concept is clearly laid out and brings together a range of complementary ideas, I found this one of the harder parts of the thesis to envision in practice, perhaps because it highlights the differences between the theoretical framework (which by this point I was engaged with) and dominant discourses in current educational structures. The final co-concept that he puts forward attempts to deal with some of this by suggesting *intelligibility* as a form of posthuman learning that goes beyond 'learning-with' (humans and more-than-humans) as proposed by Taylor (2013). The form of relational, ethical intelligibility presented here suggests that learning does not take place solely in the human subject, but should emerge as "a feature of the world in its differential becoming" (Barad, 2007, p.149).

As someone interested in children's naturecultures and how children come into ethical relationality with nonhuman actors, I find this concept particularly promising. However, as with much of the posthuman work that I have been reading recently, the major challenge comes when trying to exemplify it, let alone enact in practice. Ceder does use two appropriate examples, literacy dogs and augmented reality, to work with his concepts, but it feels like there is still a significant path to follow before I could imagine dialogue about these ideas at a school or policy level, for example. Ceder does acknowledge this, and has successfully crafted a novel set of philosophical tools for others to work with. The task ahead is for those who are realistically most likely to engage with this work, namely postgraduate students and educational researchers, to use these in our own work to shape more situated research that resonates with specific practice contexts.

In a field where the essential reading can be notoriously hard to read, I found Ceder to be a refreshingly clear and concise writer, and the use of memory stories and narrative sections throughout the book is engaging. As someone relatively new to many of the topics covered,

Ceder's synthesis of both humanist and posthumanist literature was valuable in directing me to further reading, and I would particularly recommend the book to other PhD students looking for examples of how to structure a primarily theoretical project.

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