

## **Dominant discourses in higher education**

**Book review: Kinchin, I. M. and Gravett, K. (2022) *Dominant discourses in higher education: critical perspectives, cartographies and practice*. London: Bloomsbury.**

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### ***Overview***

Drawing on extensive scholarship that encompasses ideas from theorists including Paulo Freire (1970) and Donna Haraway (2016), the authors argue that posthumanist and poststructuralist approaches to pedagogical practice could offer a potent challenge to the neoliberalism and managerialism currently prevalent in global HE. Adopting the position that there are fundamental ethical flaws in the metric-driven performance evaluations by which HE institutions (HEIs) are judged, the book aims to empower academics to reshape and rejuvenate the HE environment for better social justice.

### ***Structure and content***

The book begins with a short foreword (vii-xi) by Catherine Manathunga, whose research into educational development (2011) is used by the authors to support their view that HE pedagogical practitioners are generally failing to engage imaginatively and constructively with social theory (p.22). Manathunga's two-volume collection, edited with Dorothy Bottrell, *Resisting neoliberalism in higher education* (2019), is also foundational to Kinchin and Gravett's approach, encouraging practitioners to rethink concepts currently underpinning the operation and governance of HE (p.28).

The ten chapters are organised into three parts. The first two chapters form Part One: 'Considering the landscape', which sets out the authors' mission statement, and outlines

their critiques of prevalent neoliberal practice. In Part Two: 'Putting theory to work', the next four chapters reconsider conceptualisations of the student, the HE teaching context, and perceptions of expertise. Further explorations of the key arguments are provided in the final section, Part Three: 'Emergent polyvalent lines of flight', relating these to concept mapping approaches and dialogic analysis to provoke engagement in the final four chapters.

In Chapter One, 'Thinking beyond neoliberal discourses', the authors contextualise their own positionality through their professional roles as educators and researchers. This is useful, although could have been further developed with some additional information about the geographies and cultures most influential in their own practice. Given the emphasis on underlying beliefs and traditions underpinning the book, it is surprising that the first mention of a named country occurs in a discussion about 'assumptions of prestige' associated with older universities in the UK (p.7). Readers will infer that the book focuses on English-speaking locations, but this point could have been explicitly made, to clearly articulate which environments are under review.

The chapter outlines some of the key assumptions of the text. The authors are concerned about the limitations that may be imposed on thinking by the use of simple binary categorisations (p.7). They make the point that the uncertainty elicited by learning should be embraced as a necessary aspect of the process of education, creating a 'desirable dislocation' (p.11) capable of catalysing new understandings.

Chapter Two, 'Thinking and doing with theory: a polyvalent perspective', develops several themes introduced in Chapter One. The critique of binary polarisations is applied to the notional bifurcation of theory and practice, the authors arguing instead that if '[t]o think is to experiment', then 'theory *is* practice' (p.20). They discuss the extant and often limited application of theory in HE research, and posit that postqualitative, poststructuralist and posthumanist theories offer new approaches 'to work the ruins of a humanist and positivist legacy' (p.25). The titular cartographies are explained in relation to the work of Rosi Braidotti, as 'theoretical readings that enable us to understand how nomadic subjects experience the world' (p.26). There are some repetitions between the first two chapters, indicating that a different structure may have been better here, perhaps amalgamating the two into one. These repetitions include the same quotation from Elizabeth St. Pierre

appearing twice, in support of very similar points; haste is suggested by conflicting citations, '2021' and '2021a', the latter being erroneous (p.10; p.18).

Chapter Three opens the second part of the book with 'Positioning the student', which it achieves through a consideration of prevailing narratives and definitions. Terms now commonplace in HE discourse such as 'student engagement' and 'the student experience' are open to criticism for the assumptions they encode, and particularly for their emphasis on 'the individual as the primary locus for engagement within a humanist perspective' (p.35). This may accord with the neoliberal premise of the student as customer, but its framing risks normalising typicalities of need as reflected in student surveys, rather than actually examining lived experience (p.36).

Chapter Four, 'The university environment', provides a critique of the narratives that shape, or rather distort, the 'imperatives of social justice', and unhelpfully complicate student support (p.49). Examples from the UK are used to argue that neoliberal statements by the Conservative government about student choice in discourses allegedly promoting social mobility are 'seductive' and highly misleading (p.51). The authors argue that students are falsely encouraged to see themselves as powerful agents shaping their own destinies through the HE market; the unspoken corollary being that any lack of achievement will also result directly from their choices (p.51). In bypassing the idea that HE operates within a wider network of 'socially unjust structures', enabled by historical and prejudicial hierarchies, this neoliberal narrative can also obscure the political reasons behind existing social inequalities (p.56).

In Chapter Five, 'Ecologies of learning and teaching', the narrative critique developed in the preceding two chapters is expanded to include the construction of 'teaching' and 'learning', arguing that they are part of a larger 'rhizomatic assemblage', and not a consumerist production-line creating workers (p.65). The authors argue that lists of learning outcomes for a particular course also contribute to the idea that learning can be mapped as a linear playbook rather than a complex, non-linear journey with many twists and turns, highly subjective to the individual. Drawing extensively on ecological metaphors, the chapter considers the HEI as an organism subject to factors inherent to its own ecosystem, including 'management support, workloads, [and] institutional culture', that also requires the 'capacity to absorb disturbances' in order to continue to evolve (p.78).

'Expertise in context' is the title of Chapter Six, which again explores the use of language in discourses familiar within the HE environment. The chapter introduces the application of the 'concept map' to models of expertise (pp.83-84), arguing that extant frameworks need to additionally articulate the 'continual state of becoming' necessary for ongoing development and learning as part of that expertise (p.85). The authors encourage a vantage point characterised as 'post-abysal' thinking, wherein the binary oppositions of 'true' and 'false' may be disregarded as unhelpful and inaccurately limiting to 'ecologies of knowledge' (pp.86-87). Student expertise might therefore be reconfigured to encompass 'epistemological flexibility' (p.88).

There is a lot going on in this chapter and the reader may find themselves having to make some leaps of faith in order to maintain a consistent thread of argument. It is not clear who or what is apparently insisting on the binary oppositions under attack; the academic community is well aware of the existence of multiple epistemologies. What appears to be implicit here, rather, is that the metrical tools now so frequently used as instruments of HE regulation, governance, evaluation, quality assurance, and so forth, are reliant on unspoken theories that have little or no relationship to social justice, and deserve to be identified so they can be analysed and challenged.

The final four chapters form the conclusion of the volume, 'Emerging polyvalent lines of flight', and it is here that the authors share examples of 'critical debate [as a research method] for exploring [their] teaching and for challenging [their] thinking' (p.99). The dialogues in Chapter Seven explore the concepts of 'Teaching excellence', 'Student engagement', and 'Resilience', which encourage the questioning of 'normative narratives' (p.114). Chapter Eight provides a detailed discussion of concept mapping, introduced in Chapter Six, noting their key role in structuralist representations of learning (p.116), arguing that linear approaches have limited these visual models and in turn limited the thinking and application they can inform (p.118). Instead, the authors embrace the more recent approaches to concept mapping that have moved 'away from simplistic organization of agreed curriculum content towards the exploration of the more contested theories and values that underpin academic practice' (p.120), and advocate the use of concept maps 'in developing bridges between different concepts of knowing' (p.132).

Chapter Nine considers the view that 'accepted methodological practices' are themselves normative and normalising (pp.133). The dialogues in this chapter provide an interrogation

of postqualitative approaches, followed by an examination of hierarchies inherent within the academic peer review process that can also have normalising or silencing effects, for example through roles played by gatekeeping editors, or publishing contexts resistance to innovation (p.147). The authors hope that readers will 'take up the baton' to transform practice, for example by seeking out opportunities for authors and peer reviewers to work more collaboratively towards publication outputs (p.149), but given that many of the issues they criticise exist as a result of the underlying power structures supported by competitive and neoliberal practices built into academic systems, it is not clear how these may be dismantled. Perhaps that is the main provocation here: the reader must find their own answers.

Chapter Ten, 'Towards a relational pedagogy', usefully sums up the authors' main arguments, reiterating their desire to bring 'unsettling ideas and unfamiliar connections to the higher education literature' (p.152). However, this initially bold call to arms, 'challenging central dogmas' is overshadowed by cited warnings of other commentators such as Stephen Brookfield, who 'advises colleagues to choose their battles carefully and to attend to their emotional survival' (pp.152-153). The book focuses on the intellectual and theoretical critiques of neoliberal narratives, but the means by which the suitably provoked should then 'take up the baton' (p.149) remain subtle, potentially blunting the arms to which readers are apparently being called. If an individual moves away 'from a monoculture of acceptable knowledge to a recognition of a rich ecology of knowledges' (p.159), this undoubtedly affects their perceptions, much as decolonising oneself may prove similarly transformative, but while prevailing power structures continually enforce neoliberal narratives on the HE environment, dissenting rebel academics may be easily outflanked and outgunned.

In closing, Kinchin and Gravett encourage the pursuit of pedagogical research through the lenses they offer in the book, arguing that the 'blurring of boundaries' and the shift in perspective they offer will 'support the reader in their own process of becoming' (p.167). It is a gentle gauntlet that is thrown down to the reader, to see the book's provocations as catalysts either for self-reflection, or as encouragement to engage in research that similarly writes back against neoliberal mythologies.

One disappointment of the volume is that the index is not detailed, and is a subject index only; the inclusion of a list of cited authors would have rendered it a much more useful tool, particularly because of the rich theoretical material in the book.

## **Summary**

The arguments made in the book draw from a variety of theories and perspectives which the authors state are linked together by overarching principles that include 'disenchantment with the legacies of positivism, of humanism, of individualism' and 'contemporary performative and competitive educational cultures' (p.29). They are not alone in taking that view, and here offer a range of perceptual strategies by which alternative theories, particularly poststructuralism and posthumanism, may provide some important counterpoints through which prevailing ideologies may be challenged. In taking in such a broad sweep of previous scholarship at pace, some points made quite briefly risk sounding trite, such as Sara Ahmed's resistance to the conservative discourses promoting 'resilience' (pp.55-56). Nevertheless, the authors present a comprehensive, well-researched commentary on neoliberal HE practice.

The book is likely to be perceived positively by people who are similarly discomfited by the levels of managerialism and audit culture typical of many HEIs, especially those already engaging with or intellectually receptive to critical theory. There is a risk, however, that the book will not be sufficiently accessible to readers who adhere to alternative beliefs and perspectives to capture their interest and provide them with the intended provocations. Some readers, inevitably, will not be excited by the prospect of positioning themselves as 'rhizomatic researchers', finding principles such as to 'desire a life of becoming' (p.15) uncomfortably vague, subjective, and unquantifiable. Learning developers may find the book useful as a prompt to rethink where their own practices may be tacitly supporting dominant HE discourses. For example, if it is assumed that students will follow a linear path through a course, that assumption, encoded in the paperwork, may reinforce 'the idea of a curriculum as a set pathway' (p.68). Similarly, by placing an emphasis on learning outcomes in course design, the 'personal route' students take may be devalued and reduced to a more transactional process (p.68). The book certainly invites further debate over the future of education and the theories now dominating HE performance, and

readers who are willing to engage with the text and its potentially destabilising challenge to previously-held ideas may find it gives them a new and enriching perspective.

## **References**

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