

Book Review: Gravett, K. (2023) *Relational pedagogies: connections and mattering in higher education*. London: Bloomsbury

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Overview

Gravett's *Relational Pedagogies* builds connections and fosters a sense of mattering in higher education (HE), providing a catalyst for the current discourse around the neoliberalisation of HE within the United Kingdom (UK). Gravett delves into discussions on vulnerabilities, trust and the building of partnerships between students and their faculty of internal and external agents within HE. By focusing on the lived experiences and identities of students, Gravett's wider research literature validates the voices in HE during a significant and turbulent period.

Gravett's *Relational Pedagogies* consists of a collection of rich ideas from posthumanist theorists, sociomaterial theorists, and feminist theorists that the author uses effectively to present the case that relationships matter. She wants the reader to understand 'bodies, objects, spaces, and materialities as an interwoven web of relations' (p.1), emphasising the complexity of the challenges and constraints within HE.

Relational Pedagogies: Connections and Mattering in Higher Education aims to empower and question the social relationships between academics and students, including the internal and external agencies that influence these partnerships within HE.

Structure and content

The book starts with a short forward by Stephen Brookfield (pp.i-ix) who discusses his lived experience and illustrates the importance of relational pedagogy. He was a doctoral student at the University of Leicester. Brookfield recalls his supervisor's input during this time, stating: 'Those three years taught me that at its heart, pedagogy is relational...my ideas mattered' (pp.i-ix).

The book contains eleven chapters, which are split into three parts. 'Part 1: Relationships with students', includes chapters on vulnerability, authenticity, trust and the development of student-staff partnerships as a relational practice. 'Part 2: Relationships with others' covers supporting others in higher education, learning from others, and developing an ethic of self-care. 'Part 3: Relationality and the socio-material' covers the things that matter, the wider webs of relations, conclusions, and directions for future research. The author's rigorous usage of anecdotes, interviews and reflections contributes to the main substance of the book.

Gravett introduces the book to the reader with a question at the start: 'What does it mean to work, teach and learn in HE today?' (p.1). In my opinion, she provides a myriad of information to explore this, but her most effective understanding of what it means to work, teach, and engage in inclusive learning within contemporary HE is within chapter 5. This chapter, 'Student-staff partnership as relational practice', offers the perspective of how these projects can be used to disrupt power relations and create new connections between individuals and HE (p.67).

In contrast to the neoliberal HE landscapes and a counter-rhetoric of 'students as consumers' (p.70), Gravett examines the Student-Staff Research Partnership Project at the University of Surrey, which resulted in the publication of *Enhancing student-centred teaching* (p.71). This approach achieved partnership, collegiality, and co-creation, which implemented the feeling of mattering and relationality within HE for staff and students within the university. Gravett scrutinises her own practice within the conducive thoughts of

this chapter. She questions the possibility of further democratic approaches and the small achievement this could be for productive partnerships between staff and students (pp.78-79).

Gravett guides the reader to explore this issue in chapter 6, 'Supporting others in HE'. This chapter turns the perspective from staff dynamics to wider faculty dynamics. Gravett explores feminist theory and the concept of power within the subsection on the power of things (pp.92-95). Throughout this book, she wants the reader to understand that objects have power and matter within education. She uses the perspective of Sara Ahmed (2017, p.241).

This leads to the examination of power and agency within books and the role of a bookshelf, resulting in the reader understanding Gravett's example of herself, which inspires an interdisciplinary approach to thinking and provides a reminder of what matters to her in HE (p. 93). Gravett further expands this to the byproduct of a display area, like a bookshelf, having agency to provide motivation to the viewer as well as a talking point for visitors and peers. She reflects at the end of this subsection on the past difficulty of COVID-19 and how events can change a space that now represents a past period of collaboration and generative work atmosphere (p.94-95).

The methodology within this book refers to academic literature that the author has produced with her peers or literature that can examine the possibilities of relational pedagogies. Her qualitative interviews with her peers provide space and a kind of reader break between the heavy theoretical and analytical content. While Gravett may not imply it, the reader may feel the connectiveness and authenticity presented within these interviews.

For instance, the interviews bring back Brookfield from the foreword of the book, within chapter 4, discussing authenticity and trust in teaching and learning. This interview presents a critical discussion and reflection on his concept of value-based pedagogy and the current discourse within HE (p.58–63). In particular, the interviews with Brookfield and Simon Lygo-Baker in relation to learning from others in HE are effective and provide substance for the reader to explore further (p.99–104).

The book relates to the practice and theory of learning development. This is evident due to the positive exploration of Gravett's interaction with literature and specific peers within HE and relational pedagogies. Chapter 11 on 'Conclusions and Directions for Future

Research' illuminates the ethnographic approaches of Lesley Gourlay and Martin Oliver (2016, p.304), and Sarah O'Shea's visual research methods (2019, p.95; 2020, p.65;) (Gravett, 2023, pp.153–155). Gravett explores the contemporary variety of research and practices happening within this realm. As she expands, any of the research methods explored within the chapter offer a new opportunity to think about expanding the longevity of relational pedagogies.

Readers and academics need to continue to unpack what relational pedagogies may look like and what they mean in education theory and practice (pp.158–159). The limitation of this chapter is just outlining the key descriptions of each research project. Readers may struggle to make the connections to unpack and experiment further and identify new opportunities that could be produced. Clarity on group approaches or collaborations in research could be emphasised within this chapter. As Gravett herself recognises, 'another real challenge for educators interested in engaging relational pedagogies and thoughtful teaching practices is the challenge of how concepts and ideas may be misappropriated' (p.161).

Summary

In the final thoughts in chapter 11, Gravett concludes: 'this book ends with a simple idea: teaching is a relationship. It is a relationship between students and staff.' She writes: 'I hope that this book has been an opportunity for you to think differently about higher education and has inspired some new ideas to take forward' (pp.162-163). There is a clear indication for the reader to explore further work on what a meaningful relationship could look like for students and how to create space and enact it for them. These outcomes may result in new kinds of educational research and the engagement of stakeholders (p.159). The reader is left with the opportunity to start thinking about alternative theories for academic debate on relational pedagogies.

I would recommend Karen Gravett's *Relational Pedagogies: Connections and Mattering in Higher Education* to individuals interested in relational pedagogies and those who may be

curious to explore the area. The book's raw openness makes for an unconventional read and could become a critical tool to create further research.

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