RELATIONAL PEDAGOGIES

Connections and Mattering in Higher Education
Relational Pedagogies
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Relational Pedagogies

Connections and Mattering in Higher Education

Karen Gravett
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One of the most significant illustrations of relational pedagogy in my life happened when I was a new doctoral student. I had been accepted as a doctoral candidate in the department of adult education at the University of Leicester (UK). My application had caught the eye of Henry Arthur Jones, Professor of Adult Education at the university, and he had agreed to supervise my study. My thesis question was this: How do working-class adults with no education beyond secondary school and few, if no, qualifications to their name, become viewed as regional or national experts in their field of endeavour?

At our first meeting, Professor Jones told me something that stopped me in my tracks; namely, that the methodology in my carefully crafted thesis proposal was inappropriate for the problem I was studying, and that my study needed a complete methodological redesign. He spoke of something called ‘grounded theory’ which, in 1977, was fairly new, and told me that the survey questionnaire I had assiduously developed would not uncover the information I needed to answer my thesis question. In grounded theory, he told me, you begin by doing open-ended interviews with a few of your participants and then, after reviewing what seems to be your subjects’ dominant concerns, you decide on the next themes to be pursued.

As someone trained in my master’s degree in scientific methodology, and who had written an MA thesis on Charles Booth’s massive statistical survey of poverty in London, I was, to say the least, perturbed. Grounded theory seemed to lack rigour. Talk to a few people, then stop to see what you’ve got before choosing where to go next. How could that be an acceptable PhD research methodology? It seemed amateurish, almost lackadaisical.

As I took the train back home after our appointment, I noticed something interesting in myself. Although some scepticism remained about grounded theory, I felt no resentment, no chagrin at being made to jump through a hoop because of a research supervisor’s whim. Instead, I had the sense that Professor Jones was insisting on this change because it was what the study needed and therefore ultimately in my own best interest.
We spent three years as student and supervisor working on my thesis and this same dynamic played itself out several times. I would be fired up with an idea of what to do next and he would challenge me and posit an alternative. In effect, he made my life progressively more complicated by pointing out contradictions and omissions in my work and urging me to read something new, even when I thought the literature review was already sufficient. But I never felt that his doing this was an act of professorial authority designed to show me who was in charge. On the contrary, as the three years passed, it became increasingly evident to me that his suggestions sprang from his carefully attending to my descriptions of what I was trying to do.

I had already been teaching full time for ten years when I was awarded my PhD in 1980, but my experience as a doctoral student has stayed with me over the subsequent forty plus years of my career. Those three years taught me that at its heart pedagogy is relational. I was constantly challenged as a student, and sometimes got irritated at having to change something I had mistakenly thought was fine. But every change my teacher suggested grew out of conversations where he was trying to understand my thinking and help me do what I said I wished to accomplish. My ideas mattered. He took them seriously and I learned to trust his judgments because they were made to serve my own purposes.

In the four plus decades since my doctoral student days, I have been particularly interested in trying to get students, colleagues and myself to think more critically about the dominant ideologies we hold (and the assumptions that flow from these) that frame so much of how we think and act. Most recently, I have been working on how to encourage white members of mostly white organizations and institutions to uncover and challenge the ideology of white supremacy that frames so many institutional actions and policies. Many of the colleagues and students I work with assert that they have escaped racist conditioning, while others are so fearful of saying the ‘wrong’ thing and being viewed as racist, that they try to stay quiet, under the radar, afraid to ruffle the waters. Under these conditions not to work relationally is inconceivable. Come in posing as the racism-free expert who is going to bring students and colleagues to your point of enlightened racial cognizance and you are dead in the water.

Karen Gravett knows all too well the importance for students of feeling that they matter; that their identities and experiences count for something and that their teachers are striving to take account of these. Simply dismissing a student or colleague as wrong-headed, ignorant or uninformed is no basis on which to help someone open themselves to alternative ideas. Transformational learning teaches us that a basic tenet of working to help someone become more self-aware
is knowing as much about them as you can and, on the basis of that knowledge, creating the best connections, links and bridges to new understanding that you can. This is the heart of the connected, relational, approach she adopts.

In this book you will be taken on a journey that explores the dynamics of working relationally. You will be reminded of the need to be vulnerable and the importance of modelling publicly the openness you wish students and colleagues to develop. You’ll consider the fragile nature of trust, how delicate it is to build and how quickly it can be destroyed. The theme of what it means to work authentically, as problematic as that may be, is constantly underscored, as is the crucial importance of dialogic approaches. To be in authentic conversation with students and colleagues is a rare thing and Karen guides us in exploring how that process can be encouraged. It’s impossible for me to conceive of any kind of relational pedagogy that does not contain a central dialogic element.

But the book goes further than exploring just the dynamics of teaching and learning. We read of the political nature of mattering, of how meaningful connections and partnerships are crucial to any attempt to resist the instrumental reduction of something as beautifully complex as learning to indices and matrixes of assessment or audits of ‘effective’ or ‘best’ practices. And, unlike other books on these topics, Karen situates her analysis within the material world of objects – of land, buildings, artefacts, space. The processes she examines all occur within physical, spatial and geographical contexts and any true consideration of relationality and interconnectedness has to acknowledge that fact.

So look forward to being challenged and affirmed in the pages ahead.

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Introduction

What does it mean to work, teach and learn in higher education today? And more importantly, what should, and could, it mean? These are fundamental questions that speak to the values that underpin our practice as educators, and that shape the cultures we foster and work within, and the diverse experiences our students have as they engage with university life. Higher education offers a space in which opportunities exist for many to change, learn and develop. It has often been associated with a taken-for-granted idea of education as something inherently ‘good’ (Pedersen 2015), or with romantic stories of growth and opportunity (Meyerhoff 2019). And yet, higher education can also be a space in which power relations are durable, and where expectations of behaviour and engagement support the few, and not the many.

Higher education also offers an important opening in which educators and researchers are able to explore the interaction between society, social change and the self. This book is about looking at those interactions both in more detail, and from a different approach from that usually adopted in the literature on higher education. I suggest that understanding relationships – connections, mattering, and relationality – as fundamental to learning and teaching can offer potential to change the way we experience our work as educators. I suggest that we are inherently relational beings, that we experience a sense of self through relationships with and in relation to other people. I focus upon the role of relationships in education, how we engage in meaningful connections with others and the concept of mattering – how we feel we are valued by others.

However, I also introduce a broader conception of the relational, and of mattering, using these words in multiple and mobile ways. This idea spills over and beyond the focus upon human interactions that are commonly the mainstay of educational research. Instead, I am interested in understanding bodies, objects, spaces and materialities as an interwoven web of relations.
Throughout the book, matter is both who matters – who should be considered and valued – and matter as a material substance (materialities) and materializing force. This includes all the spaces, objects and ‘things’ of education: laptops, classrooms, pens, desks, campuses, textbooks, teaching resources, assessment briefs, worksheets, buildings – and bodily materialities too. This book considers how attending to matter, in both definitions of the word, might be helpful to our understanding of learning and teaching in higher education – and disruptive to our ways of thinking too. Relations and connections are both human-to-human relationships, the interconnection between self and others and the relations we have to and within a much broader, material, world. Matter matters. These are intersecting ideas, and in playing with both I offer a departure from the work on relational pedagogies currently taking place in the sector which tends to be focused on students, teachers and our ability to represent what happens between humans within the learning environment.

I suggest that, in our excitement to attend to the human interactions that underpin learning, and in our attention to the discursive and social aspects of learning, we often overlook those other, material, aspects that matter to ourselves and to our students, considering matter to be simply ‘passive stuff, raw, brute, or inert’ (Bennett 2009: vii). As Karen Barad explains, ‘It is as if there are no alternative ways to conceptualize matter: the only options seem to be the naïveté of empiricism or the same old narcissistic bedtime stories’ (Barad 2003: 827). Rather than being inert, I suggest that such ‘things’ have agency to shape us and our learning, existing and operating within complex entanglements. Or rather, things or materialities do not contain agency in themselves, but agency is constituted in the entanglements of things. As Karen Barad suggests: ‘Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world’ (2003: 818). Barad continues to explain her view that ‘the world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which “mattering” acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities’ (2003: 817). For Barad, ‘intra-action’, as opposed to interaction, suggests that the ‘self’ comes into being in relation with, and through the entanglement of, oneself with others. Intra-action represents an ontological shift from viewing an individual as a bounded body to a body-in-relations:

reality is not composed of things-in-themselves … the world is intra-activity in its differential mattering … That is, it is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter – in both senses of the word. (2003: 817)
As such, this book has an ambitious goal: it is designed to be relevant to educators and those working within learning and teaching, whilst also offering ideas for educational researchers, and dealing with a broad intersection of themes that touch upon the philosophy, history, critical theory and sociology of education. Its goal is to experiment with posthuman, sociomaterial and other theories, but its objective is not ‘to affirm an absolute break’ from work that has gone before, as is often assumed by critics of posthumanism (Badmington 2003: 15). I am looking not to break, fracture or divide, but to find overlaps and interconnections. I do not deny that human relationships play a hugely significant role in learning and teaching. On the contrary, the book is underpinned by the belief that both human-to-human, and human–nonhuman, interactions matter, within an entangled web of relations. In exploring a broader perspective of learning and teaching that departs from education as simply a humanist project (Pedersen 2015), I consider what we might do with the idea of a more ‘radical relationality’ (Fraser, Kember and Lury 2005: 3). Within this perspective, objects and humans are not in binary opposition but are composed of ‘nothing more or less than relations … relations and relationality cut through and across all spheres’ (Fraser, Kember and Lury 2005: 3). Similarly, I examine the notion that ‘ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other’ (Donald 2009: 6). As such, the book is designed to build upon ideas that may be comfortably familiar, but also to challenge your thinking and take you somewhere new. Just as you are feeling relaxed and comfortable, I want you to experience a sense of the unfamiliar – where might we be going next?

Specifically, in employing ideas of the relational, and of mattering, I want to speak back to cultures of individualism, and instrumentalism, that permeate higher education (and arguably society). Ideals of ‘individuality’, and notions of the self as ‘project’, are entrenched, particularly in Western cultures (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2000; Miller 2010; May 2016). For example, Vanessa May argues that, in today’s neoliberal world, ‘individuality and being the master of one’s own fate’ are highly prized (2016: 757–8), and Zygmunt Bauman describes a society consumed by the ‘incessant activity of “individualising”’ (2000: 31). Individualism, and the freedom to pursue one’s desires, has become a taken-for-granted value – commonplace, common sense. But, in an extreme form, it can also be seen as corrosive to collegiality. Of course, a great deal has already been written about the neoliberal world alluded to briefly here, and about the tensions academics face in contemporary higher education. For example, in their critique
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of the ‘impact agenda’ in higher education, Richard Watermeyer and Michael Tomlinson (2021: 8) describe a pervasive culture of ‘competitive accountability’ in UK universities, where:

so much of what has come to characterise the impact agenda is bound with the elevation of the individual as impact superstar and therefore academics as hostage to individualistic and careerist compulsions or other incentivised behaviours, and competitive accountability, therefore, compensating for the frailty of academics’ self-concept.

The cultures Watermeyer and Tomlinson describe are not exclusively a UK phenomenon. As Jill Blackmore writes, in 2020 (1332): ‘over the thirty plus years that I have been an academic, I have seen Australian universities become as careless of people and values as they have become corporatized,’ while Dorothy Bottrell and Catherine Manathunga explore powerfully the changing landscape of neoliberal universities internationally, across two detailed volumes (Bottrell and Manathunga 2019; Manathunga and Bottrell 2019). I will consider this wider context of contemporary universities further in Chapter 2, but suffice to say here, I don’t think that the incentivized culture of accountability, individualism and competition described by Watermeyer and Tomlinson is one in which many academics are comfortable within. Certainly, when training to be a teacher and university librarian nearly twenty years ago, my passions for teaching, writing and helping others to learn bore no resemblance to the ‘individualizing’ and ‘incentivized behaviours’ described above. These are still not activities I am interested in, or discourses that depict a view of education that I recognize or that is shared by my close colleagues and collaborators. However, the present problems of academia are well known, and have been critiqued to a level that threatens to engulf the reader within a torpor of fatigue. Instead of dwelling too much on the misery, as Carol Taylor (2018: 3) advocates, I’d prefer to

think beyond and outside dominant representations of higher education as a contemporary time-space damaged beyond repair by neoliberalism, and of HE learning and teaching as irremediably deformed by the marketisation, hierarchization and competition neoliberalism has ushered in.

Like Taylor, I am more interested to think ‘beyond and outside’. Specifically, to understand what the impact might be of something else, something different, something relational, for both teachers and students? Excitingly, as Sian Bayne describes, posthuman theories enable us to ‘give ourselves greater permission to experiment’:
In terms of our practice as teachers and researchers, we can see this as an incitement to continue to push at the boundaries of educational possibility, and to do so not within an instrumentalised, commodified understanding of education, but rather one which critically explores what it means – in this moment – to be ‘connected’. (Bayne 2018)

This book pushes at those boundaries and explores something more connected, affirmative, generative. Something powerful; something relational. In doing so, I play with the multilayered concepts of connection, relations and mattering. How do we connect to others, and what is the impact of connections in higher education – what Susanne Gannon and colleagues (2019) call ‘micro-moments’? What does it feel like to feel that we matter? How can we, as educators, find ways to feel valued, and to experience a sense of mattering within an increasingly marketized, metricized system built on the principles of competition, accountability and survival of the fittest? What do connections and mattering look like in the digital university, and how might higher education move from metrics to mattering? There are no easy answers to these questions. But the questions themselves are important. Examining these questions offers cracks, interstices, writings in the margins of the dominant discourses of higher education. As Fraser, Kember and Lury suggest, thinking about relationality can be regenerative: it acts as a ‘lure for life, an enticement’ (2005: 3). Ideas matter. Notes in the margins can matter.

A History of the Relational in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

The even more cheerful news is that many educators in universities, both past and present, have been interested in alternative ways of thinking that speak back to discourses that dominate higher education. Relational pedagogies that foreground the importance of relationships within higher education are becoming increasingly prevalent within pedagogy, practice and research, as educators seek to foster a different kind of education and connection with their learners. Of course, the role of relationships within learning and teaching has already had a long and generative history within the literature, and in order to situate this book within its own web of relations, connected intertextually to the legacy of a wider constellation of research, I devote a little time to the history of the relational in higher education here. Relationships have been considered fundamental to higher education for many years. For feminist writer bell hooks,
education as the practice of freedom is built on the connections a teacher might be able to make with their students in the classroom, and with the idea of present, embodied, learning:

I have been most inspired by those teachers who have had the courage to transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning. Such teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings, even the situation does not allow the full emergence of a relationship based on mutual recognition. Yet the possibility of such recognition is always present. (1994: 13)

In hooks’s view, the possibility of a relationship based on mutual recognition is key to inspirational teaching. For hooks these ideas have been founded on the notion of presence, and the ability to connect to one another as interconnected ‘whole’ human beings.

During my twenty years of teaching, I have witnessed a grave sense of dis-ease among professors (irrespective of their politics) when students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge. (1994: 14)

Relationships are also fundamental to the work of John Dewey, whose work depicts the learner as a social individual and society as an ‘organic union of individuals’ (2019: 38). Likewise, John Macmurray argued that ‘teaching is one of the foremost of personal relations … It must be a relation in which two human beings meet … care for one another, help one another’ (1964: 17). Writers in the field of critical pedagogy have also founded their philosophy on the impact of connections and the interplay between relationships and social norms. Paulo Freire has championed the role of dialogue and holistic learning. For Freire, libertarian education ‘must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction’ (1968: 45), while Henry Giroux (1983) also explores the role of genuine relationships between teachers and students.

Relationships with our students, and with our own selves as teachers, are powerful themes that resonate through the work of Parker Palmer (1983, 1998, 1999). For example, Palmer writes that ‘real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject. We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom’ (1983: xvi). He contends that ‘good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness’ (1998: 11), and he also examines how we might better understand the relationship with ourselves, and why this might matter:
Why embark on an inner journey in the first place? Because teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life … Of course, this focus on the teacher’s inner life is not exactly a conventional approach to problem solving in education! We normally try to resolve educational dilemmas by adopting a new technique or changing the curriculum, not by deepening our own sense of identity and integrity. We focus on the ‘whats’ and the ‘hows’ of teaching – ‘What subjects shall we teach?’ and ‘What methods shall we use?’ – questions that are obviously worth asking. But rarely, if ever, do we ask the equally important “who” question: “Who is the self that teaches? (Palmer 1999: 1–2)

For Palmer, the ‘who’ question is fundamental, particularly in the understanding of the way that a teacher’s selfhood might relate to others.

Viewed from a contemporary perspective, there are a number of possible issues with Palmer’s conception of an inner self: concepts of an authentic inner self and ‘selfhood’ are complex, and have been problematized (e.g. Giddens 1991; Miller 2010). Instead, our complex identities might be understood as constantly in flux and becoming (Gravett 2021). But the key message from Palmer’s work – of the value of connectedness – is an idea that can still enrich our teaching today.

Similarly, Gert Biesta (2004) has also written about the importance of relations. Interestingly, here, Biesta contends that learning takes place between the relationship – in the gap – itself between student and teacher.

Education is located not in the activities of the teacher, nor in the activities of the learner, but in the interaction between the two itself. Education, in other words, takes place in the gap between the teacher and the learner … A theory of education is, in other words, a theory about the educational relationship. It is not about the ‘constituents’ of this relationship (i.e. the teacher and the learner) but about the ‘relationality’ of the relationship. (2004: 12–13)

For Biesta, then, what is important is not the inner self of student or teacher, but the ‘relational’ quality of the relationship itself. Educational relations are both situated and complex, but learning happens in the gap, the interaction. Resonating with these ideas is Stephen Brookfield’s work (2015, 2017). Brookfield has also explored the complexity of learning and teaching as well as the significance of meaningful relationships with students, examining the concepts of vulnerability, credibility and trust. Brookfield describes how the most effective teachers ‘are also regarded as flesh-and-blood human beings with passions, enthusiasms,
frailties, and emotions’ (2015: 43). In contrast to these ‘flesh-and-blood’ beings, Brookfield notes that

the language of student learning is, on the whole, fairly bloodless. Learning objectives, learning styles, domains of learning, transfer of learning; all these suggest that learning is primarily a cognitive process to do with processing information in various ways. Yet as any teacher knows, learning – particularly that involving risk, discomfort, or struggle – is highly emotional. Sure, there are times when boredom and apathy reign supreme. But there are also times when anxiety, terror, shame, and anger are paramount. Fortunately, too, there are times when students feel joy, pleasure, pride, and love. It is interesting that no assessment protocols I know of make any use of these words or terms like these. (2015: 55)

As we can see, many of these authors refer to the disjuncture between the ‘bloodless’ discourses of learning, where learning is conceptualized as a cognitive, transactional, process, and their own conceptions of a more embodied, relational pedagogy, involving emotions and passions, and where learning is understood as something more messy, complex and situated. As Biesta and colleagues suggest (2004: 5), ‘a fog of forgetfulness is looming over education. Forgotten in the fog is that education is about human beings. And … we have also forgotten that education is primarily about human beings who are in relation with one another.’ The words here are revealing on a number of levels, and I will revisit this quote in a moment.

A similar attention to relationships can be seen within the education literature that has championed an ethics of care, for example, in the work of feminist writers Joan Tronto (1993, 2015), Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1986). Noddings’s work (e.g. 1986, 2005, 2012) foregrounded themes of caring and relatedness within mainstream American literature. Noddings suggests that ‘a climate in which caring relations can flourish should be a goal for all teachers and educational policymakers’ (2012: 777). Specifically, she writes:

The academic demands on teachers today are increasingly misdirected. Change is needed, but it will be very difficult. All over the world, thoughtful educators now emphasise the need to place cooperation over competition. This does not mean to eliminate competition entirely; some competition is both necessary and healthy. At its best, it helps us to improve performances and turn out better products. In the 21st century, however, recognition of our global interdependence and a commitment to cooperation must replace the 20th-century emphasis on competition.
We can see therefore that many educational thinkers’ writings on education have evolved around concepts of meaningful connections and student–teacher relationships as being core tenets of effective learning and teaching.

In the twenty-first century, a commitment to cooperation may not yet have replaced an emphasis on competition as Noddings hoped; however, an interest in the relational is experiencing a further revival. This is noticeable in a recent work by Peter Felten (2020) who contends that ‘relationship-rich experiences’ are crucial for students, particularly in view of the increasing diversity of the student body and escalating concerns about student well-being. Likewise, Cathy Bovill (2020a) actively engages the concept of relational pedagogies as ways to build meaningful relationships between staff and students and to offer alternatives to impersonal customer-focused versions of higher education. Relational pedagogy, Bovill writes, ‘puts relationships at the heart of teaching and emphasises that a meaningful connection needs to be established between teacher and students as well as between students and their peers, if effective learning is to take place’ (2020a: 3). Work by Kirsty Finn (2015) on women’s experiences in higher education also examines the role of a relational approach to student experiences. Finn explains that often ‘emotions and relational concerns are seen as somehow outside of everyday life at university … notions of affect and feelings of relatedness become background factors … rather than the focal point of studies which seek to understand the everyday experiences of student life’ (2015: xii).

The importance of relationships, connections and mattering has also been unpacked in the work of Harriet Schwarz (2019). Schwarz reminds us that relational pedagogies are not fluffy ideas: ‘relationships are not inherently or essentially light or easy’ but ‘dynamic and complex’ (xiii). For Schwarz, the notion of mattering is key: ‘When I think back to my most important teachers and mentors I realise that feeling as if I mattered to them was a common thread in all the relationship’ and, similarly, ‘some of the most memorable and motivating experiences as a teacher have been when I felt I mattered in the lives of students’ (2019: 131) Schwarz suggests that even ‘one good exchange’ can have the power to enrich students’ experiences of learning, whilst simultaneously fuelling ‘our ability to work’ (2019: 27). Interestingly, Schwarz contends that high-quality connections do not have to signify higher workloads for academics or time commitments (2019: 27). This is a criticism commonly levelled at arguments for relational pedagogies, and I will return to Schwarz’s work and to these ideas throughout the book. Similarly, the power of relational connections has been further emphasized by Caroline Walker-Gleaves (2019), who argues that