

Book Review

Bovill, C. (2020) *Co-creating Learning and Teaching: Towards Relational Pedagogy in Higher Education*. St Albans: Critical Publishing.

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Wherever you live, whatever your role and whatever your personal politics, you are likely to agree that society is becoming increasingly fractious. While electronic communication has made it easier to send information to others, entrenched views can sometimes hinder debate and make consensus difficult. Moreover, it seems that those who embrace the diverse opinions of others are often regarded as less newsworthy than 'strong' individuals who impose their own views, and it was against this backdrop that I found Catherine Bovill's book so refreshing. She is certainly not the first advocate of higher education students and staff working together to co-design elements of their curriculum, but she has produced a concise, very readable account of our current understanding of the topic. In particular, she uses the book to argue that relational pedagogy and co-creation lead to more human and engaged learning and teaching which directly enhances the capabilities students need in their current and future lives. Unsurprisingly, the book's focus on relational pedagogy biases the content towards classroom teaching; the reason being that the approach involves forming trusting relationships between tutor and students, and these can be more difficult to establish in purely online environments. In its ethos, the book resonates with socio-cultural learning theory and challenges the current consumer model of education. Notably, in Chapter 1 the point is made that dialogue with students should consider what helps them to learn, not what they like.

As well as an introductory overview of the topics, Chapter 1 includes a brief historical account of the development of relational pedagogy from the writings of Aristotle via the philosophies of Dewey and Rogers in the early and mid-1900s to the current interest in co-creation in both school and higher education which began in the 1970s. This journey reveals the diverse, often opportunistic, reasons for adoption of such teaching practices as well as the benefits that have been gained.

The next two chapters are critical appraisals of the relevant educational research literature with Chapter 2 considering relational learning and Chapter 3 considering co-creation. In both chapters a series of literature quotes are presented which are then developed into overarching themes. In Chapter 2 the important point is made that high-quality, respectful student-tutor interactions generate feelings of 'belonging' which promote inclusivity and hence strongly influence the nature of student-student interactions both inside and outside the classroom. However, while much evidence is provided for the benefits of relational teaching, it is acknowledged that the approach is often not prioritised in higher education for multiple reasons including entrenched power structures, tutors' lack of engagement with the educational research literature, inadequate staff development and large class sizes.

Chapter 3 moves to co-creation of learning and provides examples of students' enthusiasm for the process and the benefits they gain. This chapter places co-creation within a spectrum that runs from student engagement to active learning to co-creation and, finally, to student-staff partnerships; a scale that seems to represent increasing relational learning, increasing negotiation and student decision making, and increasing equality between students and tutors. The important point is also made that co-creation should not negate the subject expertise of the tutor Hence the approach needs to be restricted to how learning takes place to meet the existing broad aims of the course. The benefits to students outlined in this chapter include increased motivation, a greater sense of belonging and identity, greater meta-cognitive awareness, and enhanced transferable skills for future professional

development. Conversely, the challenges of co-creation are that students can be initially resistant, and that the process may generate unpredictable outcomes which may either a) challenge existing institutional structures and norms, or b) not be fully inclusive and so exacerbate inequalities. Ways of overcoming these challenges are suggested in the final part of the chapter.

In Chapters 4 and 5 the implementation of relational teaching and co-creation of learning is discussed more detail, with Chapter 4 considering aspects of the process as a whole and Chapter 5 suggesting specific approaches for tutors embarking on the process. Within Chapter 4 the mutually reinforcing nature of relational pedagogy and co-creation is particularly emphasised, as is the need to a 'set the tone' from the first day of new courses by informally chatting to students at the start of classes, learning their names and providing encouragement when they make their first contribution. More generally, tutors should provide multiple opportunities for student dialogue during classes, and use the relational knowledge that they gain to modify their teaching and emphasise its relevance for the students' current and future development. Finally, in this chapter, quotes and examples are used to show how the benefits of co-creation outlined in Chapter 3 might be realised in the classroom.

Chapter 5 provides specific advice to tutors wishing to introduce co-creation into their classes. It is essentially a toolkit for tutors that includes and explains advice such as: begin small; invite rather than force student participation; seek support from colleagues; and learn from your mistakes. It also provides some coping strategies for facilitating co-creation within large classes and for stimulating interest when students seem disengaged or colleagues are unsupportive.

Chapter 6 is the final chapter which summarises the book's conclusions. It invites tutors to reflect on the way that they currently teach and whether more relational co-creating methods might be more beneficial to their students, could enhance their own job satisfaction, and also, perhaps, foster

the first increments of a culture change within their organisation. Overall, I commend this book to you and hope that you enjoy reading it. Its mixture of educational research findings and practical classroom advice, together with its brevity, should appeal to busy tutors, researchers, and other educational professionals. At first glance, it does seem rather highly priced for a slim volume and I did feel that there was a little overlap between the content of different chapters, but owners of the book will find it a valuable source of ideas and a very useful list of references that comprises one tenth of the whole text. Personally, I am sure that I will return to this book often; it will certainly bolster my belief that a co-operative world could be far better than our current divided one.