



# Teaching in Higher Education

## Critical Perspectives

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cthe20>

## Pedagogies of mattering: re-conceptualising relational pedagogies in higher education

Karen Gravett, Carol A. Taylor & Nikki Fairchild

To cite this article: Karen Gravett, Carol A. Taylor & Nikki Fairchild (2021): Pedagogies of mattering: re-conceptualising relational pedagogies in higher education, Teaching in Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/13562517.2021.1989580](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1989580)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1989580>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 21 Oct 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4094



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Pedagogies of mattering: re-conceptualising relational pedagogies in higher education

Karen Gravett <sup>a</sup>, Carol A. Taylor <sup>b</sup> and Nikki Fairchild <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Surrey Institute of Education, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath, UK; <sup>c</sup>School of Education and Sociology, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article engages posthuman theory to propose a rethinking of the theory and practice of relational pedagogies within higher education (HE). There has been renewed emphasis within HE discourses on the significance of relationships within learning and teaching as a means to offer a counter-view to an *uncaring* marketised HE system. This article argues the need to build on and extend the current framing of relational pedagogies. It argues for an ethically affirmative reframing, through a posthuman, feminist materialist theoretical lens. The theory we elaborate on is put to work through illustrative examples from our experiences and practices as educators, which illuminate how and why relational pedagogies, considered as pedagogies of mattering, need to involve the nonhuman and more-than-human. Our examples sketch potential shapes for a pedagogy of mattering across three key areas of teaching in higher education: curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 April 2021  
Accepted 7 September 2021

## KEYWORDS

Posthumanism; relational pedagogies; mattering; care; engagement

## Introduction

The importance of relationships, of connections and of care, within learning and teaching, have recently come to the fore more sharply within HE as a means to think beyond an *uncaring* neoliberal, competitive and individualising HE system (Bovill 2020; Felten and Lambert 2020; Barnacle and Dall’Alba 2017; Burke and Larmar 2020; Kinchin 2020). The long periods of physical staff-student isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic, with connection via computer screen and virtually, has further intensified the focus on and practices of relationality and engagement. However, current framings of staff-student relations and the theoretical underpinnings of relational pedagogies continue to rely on long-standing cognitivist and humanist traditions. Such framings fail to consider how educationally engaged human relationships are entangled within the spaces, places, contexts and environments with which they occur, and do not take account of how objects, bodies and materialities impact upon learning, teaching and connection. In this article, we use posthuman and feminist materialist theory to

**CONTACT** Karen Gravett  k.gravett@surrey.ac.uk  Surrey Institute of Education, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey PO1 2UP, UK

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

reconceptualise relational pedagogies. The reconceptualisation we elaborate on has implications for ontology, epistemology and ethics. It requires us to focus more sharply on materiality in higher education as a means to pay greater attention to the question: who and what matters within relational pedagogies? We explore how relational pedagogies, which we recast as pedagogies of mattering, shape our practice as educators. We deploy posthuman, feminist materialist theory to illuminate how this reframing of relational pedagogies as pedagogies of mattering may produce new and different insights for curriculum, learning and teaching and assessment, drawing on our practices as three lecturers and researchers working in higher education.

Posthumanism and allied variants – relational materialism, socio-material studies, feminist new materialism, process philosophy, post-qualitative inquiry – are burgeoning across social science, humanities and arts fields, producing fundamental shifts in how we conceptualise ontology, epistemology and ethics (Barad 2007; Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Braidotti 2013; Taylor et al. 2019; Ferrando 2019; Gourlay 2021; Braidotti and Bignall 2019). The overarching aim of these new fields is to contest anthropocentric legacies of damages and practices of usage and appropriation to produce more inclusive knowledge and research practices, an aim shared with post-colonial, anti-racist, feminist, and poststructuralist approaches. Underpinning the broad web of theories considered as posthuman, is the notion that posthumanism decentres the ‘human’ as a separate, bounded, individualistic category in order to situate the human in relation – with other humans and nonhumans. This article takes up posthumanism as theory and practice to consider how we can centre this relational move in our lives as educators. In this, we respond to the challenge articulated by Cary Wolfe (2016, 1) to consider ‘how posthuman theory creates new, imaginative ways of understanding relations between lives’, and we use posthuman approaches to offer some new insights which ‘extend traditional conceptions about what matters’ (Taylor and Fairchild 2020, 1) in higher education. The article’s central argument is that placing the human in relation, attending to the entangled materialities that constitute these relations and the matters that arise therefrom, offers a fundamental recasting of being, knowing and doing in HE and research.

While posthuman theory poses new possibilities for ethico-political orientations, priorities and outcomes, it is important to emphasise that posthumanism is also a practical philosophy. It is firmly grounded in the specificities of the relations that emerge and which constitute the unfolding educational lives of students and staff. It is this focus on relationality within a broader network of human–nonhuman-material relations that enables posthumanism to offer an important theoretical lens in an affirmative centring of relational pedagogies. In this, we build on the small body of work of those using posthumanism or socio-material approaches in HE, for example, in student engagement theory-practice (Gourlay and Oliver 2018), science education (Higgins, Wallace, and Bazzul 2019), teacher education (Murriss and Borchers 2019), student belonging (Gravett and Ajjawi 2021) and teaching excellence (Gravett and Kinchin 2020). In the following sections, we outline the key tenets of the posthuman theory. We then turn to relational pedagogies. After that, the remainder of the article focuses on our elaboration of three dimensions of a posthuman relational pedagogy – a pedagogy of mattering – drawing upon our experiences of living and working during the Covid pandemic. In these sections, we consider what a pedagogy of mattering would look like when put to

work in three key areas of higher education: curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment. The conclusion considers what new insights are offered by pedagogies of mattering, how these may create more meaningful, affirmative relationships in higher education, and suggests directions for future research.

## Tracing the contours of posthuman theory

For educational researchers, posthuman theory can create new openings for thinking differently and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, and there is increasing recognition that posthuman theory is moving from a position on the ‘wild fringes’ (Gourlay 2021, 11) to a point where it is seen to offer teachers and researchers a breadth of both useful and necessary ideas:

A posthuman perspective potentially allows for a more focused, and accurate, account for what actually goes on, in the day-to-day of educational processes ... it allows for the questioning of the fundamental assumptions underlying agency and the unfolding of epistemic practices in higher education, both digital and analogue ... it allows for a move away from ideological assumptions and stereotypes, towards a profoundly ethnographic, observing, noticing stance towards practice. (Gourlay 2021, 8–9)

We indicated above that posthumanism’s inclusion of the nonhuman proposes a fundamental recasting of assumptions about ontology, epistemology and ethics, which brings with it different starting points for educational research and new ways of grasping educational experience than that afforded by humanism. Ontologically, posthumanism’s decentring of humans puts the human in relation – with nonhuman others, environments and the world. This relational ontology calls into question human/nonhuman binaries and casts doubt on the boundaries, categories and identities such binaries underpin. These ontological shifts require a new epistemological orientation. In posthumanist, feminist materialist thinking, the knowing subject does not stand apart from the world to observe, describe, measure and know it. Because all is considered as relational, the researcher is not conceptualised as a separately-bounded self but is part of the assemblage being investigated. These radical shifts in how educational research is conceptualised entail a different ethical stance based on an ethics of engagement which includes the non-human in questions about *who matters and what counts* (Ferrando 2019; Wolfe 2016).

The neoliberal marketisation of HE, the effects of austerity, and now Covid-19 in reshaping the HE sector at the level of institution, faculty/department and student experience, makes the task of formulating socially just pedagogies based on meaningful connections, and of care for self, others and the wider world, a pressing concern. How can a posthuman framing help us better attend to staff-student caring relationships in a contemporary context in which ‘attending to difference or indeed developing more expansive forms of care have been rapidly diminishing’ (The Care Collective 2020, 4–5)? In the remainder of this section we outline how the posthuman-inflected theories of Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Karen Barad provide the grounds for positioning care and response-ability as a central feature in an expanded conceptualisation of relational pedagogies.

Donna Haraway’s (1988, 1997) work, and her notion of response-ability, have had a profound influence on shaping a more situated feminist perspective on knowledge. Haraway describes response-ability as a relational process. Rather than responsibility

which evokes paternalistic ideas of *being* responsible *for* another, and intimates a dimension of power-over, response-ability focuses on our ability to respond, to act and how we might learn to be more responsive to others. An ontology of response-ability involves an acknowledgement of situated practices. Moving beyond dualist approaches – the self/other of responsibility – Haraway posits situated knowledge as based on an inherent relationality, which she sees as a more productive way to engage with the world. In posthuman new materialist thinking, response-ability and pedagogy are intertwined as they ‘constitute relational processes through which social, political, and material entanglements in higher education ... are rendered capable through each other to bring about social transformation’ (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017, 64).

Relations are also central to Karen Barad’s (2007, 2014) framing of agential realism via her concept of intra-action. Barad creates the neologism of ‘intra-action’, as opposed to interaction, to suggest that the ‘self’ comes into being in relation with and through the entanglement of, oneself with others, whether human, nonhuman or environmental. For Barad, individuals do not pre-exist the event but are materialised through intra-actions that constitute the event. She argues, ‘it is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the “components” of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful’ (Barad 2003, 815). Intra-action represents an ontological shift from viewing an individual as a bounded body to a body-in-relations whose form is articulated via ongoing intra-actions (Barad 2003). Events, or phenomena, are produced by material-discursive intra-actions which acknowledge both discourse and matter. From Barad’s perspective ‘nothing exists in and of itself ... everything is always already in relation ... matter and discourse are co-constitutive’ (Fairchild and Taylor 2019, 1).

Barad also introduces the concept of agential cuts. Intra-actions can enact agential cuts ‘effecting a separation between “subject” and “object”’ (Barad 2003, 815). The agential cut presents a momentary demarcation of a particular happening with the phenomena, which produces a body or entity (Barad 2007). Here ‘different agential cuts offer new potential realities that may give rise to conditions of possibility for some bodies or that may produce exclusions of/for other bodies’ (Fairchild and Taylor 2019, 6). Attending to agential cuts can enable us to see more vividly the active choosing or cutting of knowledge, for example, in the context of curricula. Acknowledging such agential cuts and the impact of matter and discourse can reveal how power structures in HE are shaped and constituted by the politics of location and relations and connections between bodies (Braidotti 2013).

Similarly, the notion of affirmative ethics (Braidotti 2013) provides a means to consider what is produced by posthuman relational pedagogies and how this plays out between staff and students. Affirmative ethics ‘is based on the praxis of constructing positivity, thus propelling new social conditions and relations into being’ (Braidotti 2013, 129). Considering the affirmative within higher education is, wherever possible, about orienting to practices, modes of knowledge production, and ways of acting that are collaborative, connected and non-competitive. Practically, we might see each of these concepts of response-ability, intra-action, agential cuts or affirmative ethics, as offering new insights into how we understand our day-to-day connections with students. As educators, we need to understand far more about staff and students’ day-to-day experiences, intra-actions and material contexts.

## Relational pedagogies in HE

Relational pedagogies, and questions of how to engage, care and connect with students have become more central in recent research within HE (Felten and Lambert 2020; Bovill 2020; Barnacle and Dall’Alba 2017; Burke and Larmar 2020; Kinchin 2020). Relational pedagogies position meaningful relationships as fundamental to effective learning and teaching and explore ways of fostering connections, authenticity and responsiveness (Gravett and Winstone 2020). This attention to relationships is foregrounded by a long history within the wider literature of feminist scholarship exploring ethics of care in learning and teaching (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 2005, 2012). Positioned as part of the goal to foster meaningful learner engagement, and to work towards building positive student-staff relationships, these ideas are also closely linked to the recent interest in working with students as partners (Bovill 2020), itself an off-shoot of the student voice movement (Lygo-Baker, Kinchin, and Winstone 2019). These directions form part of a concerted move on the part of HE educators to enable students to be understood as ‘more than customers’ (Gravett, Kinchin, and Winstone 2020) and to provide the conditions for more generative relationships to develop in HE learning and teaching contexts which have been deformed by the effects of academic capitalism and neoliberalism (Bottrell and Manathunga 2019; Taylor 2018). The contemporary university has been described as a space that is dominated by ‘forces inimical to individual flourishing and collaborative endeavours’ (Taylor et al. 2020, 1). As a result, as Kinchin (2020, 1) contends, ‘the dominant narratives currently offering critique of the neoliberal university suggest a professional environment that is both uncaring and unhealthy’.

However, despite these important recent shifts, the issue of how to increase the traction of practices and pedagogies oriented to care, mattering and the relational in HE contexts marked by gender, race, (dis)ability and social inequalities, is an ongoing concern. This is even more so given the broader social context in which social inequalities are widening and educational disparities remain entrenched (Bozalek et al. 2018; Richardson, Mittelmeier, and Rienties 2020). For example, in terms of gender alone, there is ‘a tiny number of women vice-chancellors, a disproportionately low number of women professors, a shamefully low number of black female professors’ (Taylor and Fairchild 2020, 11), whilst largely female cleaning staff, who do the ‘dirty work’ of HE, are rarely even acknowledged. This does not make for a particularly caring environment.

Care has long been taken for granted as ‘women’s work’, and feminists have elaborated ethics of care rooted in considerations of how interpersonal connections are often bound up with power. Noddings (2012, 232) speaks of caring as a ‘responsibility to one another [based on] mutual and spontaneous regard.’ Gilligan (1982) focuses on the micropolitical practices of power, to consider the inclusion of some voices and the silencing of others, and how care entails feelings, emotions and effects. These feminist considerations align with our understanding of care as a pedagogic practice and praxis, the details and specificities of which matter. Feminist materialist, posthuman ethics see care as an in situ practice of mutuality, reciprocity and relationality. As a mode of embodied labour largely seen as women’s work, care can be thought of – and enacted – as a move against the conditions of the accelerated academy. However, these potentially positive aspects of caring as a relational practice, should not blind us to the fact that care remains a complex, potentially problematic and ambivalent notion (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Who matters and how

care is distributed entails ethical and political questions, which the affirmative ethics of posthuman relational pedagogies bring more sharply to the fore (Braidotti 2013).

Tensions around care and relational pedagogies become even more acute when we consider the pressures of marketisation upon educators in HE. Balancing a desire to foster meaningful relationships and engagement, with the constraints of ever-growing cohort sizes, workload pressures, casualisation and, since Covid-19, threats of redundancy and course closure, creates significant tensions for teachers (Walker-Gleaves 2019). In addition, concerns have been expressed regarding educators being expected to provide *too much* support, potentially leading to a therapeutic culture (Ecclestone 2012), and an uncomfortable blurring between the personal and the work-life of the teacher. Furthermore, in an era where the discourse of student satisfaction is pervasive, and grades and ‘success’ are an everyday worry for students, teachers may also experience significant pressure to care on demand. Murphy (2015, 719) cautions against ‘the conflation of care with affection, happiness, attachment, and positive feeling’ and contends that it is time to ‘take a more critical stance toward the politics of care’, a stance that is not one of rejection but one which pays attention to the politics of care and how ‘the exercise of power operates through care in many divergent ways’. These concerns speak directly into our own: posthuman pedagogies of mattering enable us to look again at practices of care and relationality, but in this more critical vein.

We define pedagogies of mattering as a broad concept that encompasses relational pedagogies within understandings of higher education, and of the world, as a more-than-human concern. Such a view contests simplistic conceptions of care as wholly positive, and instead considers how concepts of care and mattering can be understood as complex, nuanced, and ambivalent human-nonhuman relational practices. In current formulations of a relational pedagogy, who and what matters is almost always understood as human. Likewise with care: ‘what most... [care] perspectives have in common is that they take humans or human meaning-making as the sole constitutive force’ (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi 2010, 539). As a result, discourses and practices of care usually attend to the individuals involved (teacher; student; and peer) and focus entirely on the role of (seemingly agentic) human actors. Instead, we follow Bozalek et al. (2018), Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) and Taylor (2018) in suggesting that it is time to consider what new matters are disclosed if we disrupt human-centric notions of relations and caring work. Pedagogies of mattering, we suggest, enable us to notice and consider the impact of a broader range of actors upon learning and teaching, and to tune into the objects, bodies and spaces that constitute the material mattering of learning and teaching as an in situ practice of relationality. This broader conceptualisation of pedagogies of the mattering can, we think, help extend and recast understandings of relational pedagogies within HE.

### **Pedagogies of mattering: three illustrative examples**

As indicated above, the work on relational pedagogies in HE has powerfully exposed that the relational – staff and students’ relationships and connections – matters. We have also put forward the argument that humans’ connections and experiences are constituted and shaped by the material world. Materiality matters too, although thus far, this has received little attention in studies of HE. A posthuman relational pedagogy seeks to address this



oversight. Along with situating the human in relation, pedagogies of mattering support shifts in understandings of student–teacher connections by considering how we might foster broader ways of thinking about care, relationships, the affective, space, places, objects, bodies and matter within HE learning environments. In the following section, we put pedagogies of mattering to work in an exploration of three fundamental areas of practice: curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment. These sections work as illustrative examples that offer practical insights. They are drawn from our own recent HE observations, pedagogies and practices, and are framed by our experiences during the Covid pandemic. They serve to propose possibilities for what pedagogies of mattering might look like in practice.

## Curriculum

Reconceptualising relational pedagogies through a posthuman theoretical lens means a rethinking of some of the fundamental questions pertaining to the curriculum. Dominant models of the curriculum have often posited the curriculum as a body of circumscribed subject knowledge, and as a straightforward matter of content, purpose and organisation. They often prescribe objectives-based linear models where learning is broken down into the set of outcomes, the organisation of learning experiences and evaluation (e.g. Biggs and Tang 2011). Learning is expected to align; educators are expected to create a ‘web of consistency’ (Biggs and Tang 2011, 99). Posthumanism fosters a different approach, encouraging educators to think in new ways about the socio-material construction of the curriculum, and its privileging of who and what matters, and about the role of situated knowledge. Posthuman approaches can be seen to build upon feminist and postmodernist ideas that emphasise ‘disequilibrium, indeterminacy, lived experience’ which guides attention to the importance of ‘miniscule changes’ in an ‘open-ended process’ (Doll 1993, 98), or to view the curriculum as ‘the construction of the individual in relation to educative moments’ (Slattery 2006, 292). Curriculum, in this more expansive frame, is ‘a multifaceted concept, constructed, negotiated and renegotiated at a variety of levels and in a variety of arenas’ (Goodson 1994, 111).

Pedagogies of mattering build upon these ideas, and also intertwine with recent calls in the UK to decolonise the curriculum, which questions the apparent neutrality of the curricula. This work resonates closely with posthumanism’s goal to understand education as a relational practice of entangled histories, not as a colonial master narrative of progress and enlightenment. Barad’s theorisations of agential cuts (2007) work to enable us to consider which bodies matter and how these matters are either brought to the foreground or are further erased within curricula. However, crucially, any decolonising work must involve a focus on the material. In rethinking how the curriculum is enacted, we must focus our attention on noticing the day-to-day materialities and objects of learning: the recommended text, the teaching materials, the reading list, the set resources and the ways in which these may contribute to the reification or marginalisation of bodies and the normalisation of whose voices matter. Indeed, the role of citation practices has been exposed powerfully by Sara Ahmed (2017, 16) as ‘feminist bricks’: thinking differently about whose voices are included has material consequences. Likewise, thinking in new ways about the constraints of imposed boundaries, and the impact of agential



cuts on knowledge forces us to look at the material impacts of taken-for-granted aspects of curriculum design, for example, the module as a discrete chunk of knowledge with its clearly delineated boundaries, or the borders of our disciplines and how porous these might be.

Enacting pedagogies of mattering, then, can foster significant changes in terms of how we approach curricula, as well as encouraging educators to question the impact of all of our choices and decisions when cutting and creating curricula. The emphasis on relational ontology that underpins pedagogies of mattering moves educators towards working alongside students in the co-creation of the curriculum. For example, students co-design content on our Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in a move to materialise the dispersal of power regarding curriculum decisions. Likewise, students can be invited to curate their reading lists, working together alongside tutors. Such moves create new openings for student–teacher intra-action and new pedagogical spaces for critical discussions around curriculum design.

A further key question is: where should the curriculum be taught? A pedagogy of mattering invites educators to think more deeply about the role of the contexts in which learning happens. Spaces physically represent institutions' expectations and care for their students, materialising values regarding learning and teaching and they shape our relationships and learning experiences. In today's (pre-Covid) HE campus, too often, increasing student numbers resulted in students being squeezed into too small lecture theatres, or being unable to find a space in the library. Teachers' attempts to foster collaborative group work may be obstructed by a lack of space in the classroom to move around. Similarly, lecture theatres designed for didactic modes of teaching and content 'delivery' often sit in tension with espoused strategies regarding student-centred learning. For both staff and students, learning spaces create a 'sticky' materiality; a message of caring or uncaring can easily be materialised and felt.

The digital spaces, Teams and Zoom rooms, in which we presently teach and learn also provoke new questions in terms of how the curriculum is taught, prompting, as Mulcahy (2018, 13) suggests, a 'thinking [of] the term learning spaces as something we do (stage, perform, enact), rather than something we have (infrastructure)'. These platforms are 'tools' that connect us with one another; without these, our online teaching relationships cannot happen. And yet, these 'tools' are also agentic. Online teaching and learning physically affect our bodies. Engaging with one another online can be surprisingly exhausting, and our bodies shift in response to sitting awkwardly, our eyes tire after reading a screen for too long. A pedagogy of mattering prompts teachers to consider more closely how curricula is enacted through contextualised, socio-material, practices and spaces. It pushes us to consider how students' and staff engage materially with curricula, its objects, resources and spaces; it encourages each of us to ask what changes might I make in my practice to understand or to shape how situated activities come to matter to students' experiences of curriculum?

## Teaching and learning

Pedagogies of mattering bring to the fore how nonhuman objects are entangled with teaching and learning. Pre-Covid corridors became nexus points as students waited for their room to be free – doors open, and the changeover begins. Teachers frantically

signing onto computers – the screen fires up, and the lecture starts. These multiple bodies form human–nonhuman assemblages that choreograph what comes to matter as teaching and learning within sessions. Thinking teaching and learning with posthuman theory is about thinking pedagogy where objects and bodies collide. Classroom relations materialise power: teacher at the front, sometimes behind a desk; students sitting in lecture theatres or at their own desk, a captive audience; some students open their laptops or tablets, other use pen and paper; those students, when put into groups, speak (or not); students with sensory impairment or who are wheelchair users are made to ‘fit’ into unwieldy classrooms.

These power relations are also translated in practice environments where teachers in training entangle with school/early years classrooms, parents, expectations of their role and objects and spaces (Fairchild 2017). Students on placement enter unfamiliar material spaces, and these environments can initially disrupt and disorientate. Fairchild (2017) explores how these moments are examples of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) entitle segmentarity where students are trying to navigate placement structures whilst needing to implement and apply the theory learned in university classrooms and meet requirements for their assessment. The relationships between the students and the material objects they encounter on placement can allow for moments of stuttering (Deleuze 1997) where students experience moments of unease that result in an unsettling of the segments they experience which create ‘not only a fracture in discourse or language, but also an opening to experiences of embodiment and materiality that are crucial to [early years] teaching’ (Fairchild 2017, 296). The examples given from classrooms and placement might seem entirely mundane – but then desks, chairs, window blinds, doors, carpets and room lights are also entirely mundane, as are iPads, pens, pencil cases, water bottles and students’ bags, as are the placement experiences, and yet, nevertheless, they shape students’ physical orientations to teaching and learning and students’ emotional sense of value within any particular space. Focussing on these ‘unnoticed dynamic force of things and their capacity for confederate intra-action with human agencies’ (Fairchild 2017, 665) reveals the potential for inequalities and moments of doubt or unsettlement. Pedagogies of mattering resonates across all the work we may do with students in any learning and teaching conditions, and through this, we can consider ways to open up more relational caring moments. Moments matter.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, classroom spaces were teeming with bodies, staff, students, desks, chairs, laptops, slides and flipchart pens. As lectures finished, bodies dispersed, generally leaving 10 minutes before the next influx of new bodies that occupied the classroom. It is challenging to develop caring relationships between bodies in classrooms spaces when there is a finite time allocated to each lecture. These challenges have become magnified when teaching during Covid-19. On-campus and other social spaces, the sanitising bottle was positioned at the entrance to shops, cafes, in corridors, seminar rooms and lecture halls, as well as being carried personally and used frequently. When campuses were offering face-to-face teaching, masks were *de rigueur*, many of us also wore gloves when doing in-person teaching. How do these things influence pedagogy? How do they shape conditions in which care matters? The move to online teaching saw the relationality between bodies become mediated by laptops, tablets and smartphones. In these liminal online spaces, anonymous bodies appear, ephemeral and ghostly, as cameras are turned off – a gallery of black squares

populated by a student name, an email or a phone number. These online relational bodies lack physical form; all online participants (staff and students) are bodies without physical boundaries (Haraway 2004). Online bodies and events coalesce in non-intentional ways to form 'temporary, emergent and conditional unities of bodies which connect and interact in specific forms of content and expression, continually in flux' (Fairchild and Taylor 2019, 12). These online assemblages materialise different types of bodily connections that can produce challenges for relational pedagogies without the visual and physical cues present when teaching face-to face.

Enacting pedagogies of mattering can tune us into how normative learning and teaching relations are shaped by object-space arrangements in classrooms which impact student-staff relations and produce visible and unknown and hidden in/ex/clusions. Learning and teaching intra-actions do not always produce predictable results and can reinforce both marginalisation and privilege. During the Covid-19 lockdown, bodily privilege and erasure have been very apparent where access to digital and face-to-face learning opportunities have produced a number of outcomes. It has enabled an increase in participation for those staff and students who are shielding and physically unable to attend lectures. However, agential cuts also reveal the digital poverty of access for some students, additionally some (generally working-class, black and Asian students or students from other ethnic minorities) need to work to supplement student loans which can then result in access issues.

The requirements for home working during Covid-19 have blurred home spaces and workspaces. This resulted in staff sitting at tables/desks teaching and working in these home-work spaces, adding a background to or blurring the background of, their video calls to hide the personal artefacts and objects of home life. Home-work-bodies-spaces intra-act and these phenomena have heightened the pressure felt by staff to balance teaching and learning with work-home life. These challenges have been sharply felt in gendered care work (for children and other family members at home) undertaken by predominantly female academics and professional service staff, which has added to the precarity and emotional labour for those who have not met the 'productivity' requirements of the neoliberal university. Expectations of caring for students, self and family commitments have taken on a different meaning when the time required to produce and provide online material and support has mushroomed, leaving little space for some academic bodies to flourish. Pedagogies of mattering also focuses on the ability and participation for those that have material access to HE (laptop, internet connection and time), the perspectives of professional service colleagues and their 'place' in the academy, and the lack of career progression for female academics which is even more problematic at the intersections of race, social class and (dis)ability. A response-able pedagogy of mattering can help us interrogate bodily productions and what is produced via agential cuts at these intersections.

Enacting learning via pedagogies of the mattering can, we suggest, not only lead to more nuanced understandings of student/teacher pedagogic relationalities, but offer some ways to facilitate more productive teaching and learning relations for both parties by encouraging us to consider the impact material spaces have on teaching and learning. This might lead us to make specific changes to the ways in which classrooms are staged or objects or resources are used to afford a more ethical approach to power dynamics between staff and students. This could also include flexible approaches to

designing learning activities, and paying ongoing attention to students' actual learning practices so that they may improve scaffolding learning as courses unfold. While it has become the norm for many teachers during pandemic times to offer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous content, and a diversity of learning materials, pedagogies of mattering foreground the need to incorporate more flexible opportunities to connect with students. Practically these might include using technologies such as recorded screencasts or short videos, as well as routine approaches such as email, Zoom or opportunities for face-to-face dialogue. Paying attention to students' day-to-day socio-material learning practices, teachers may wish to adopt an ongoing 'noticing stance towards practice' (Gourlay 2021, 8–9). This might include attending carefully to the ways in which participants' material circumstances may be shaping and impacting their learning. It might include fostering ongoing routine connections: 'staying in touch' in order to understand students' engagement and to materialise practices of care.

## Assessment

Contemporary higher education institutions are market-focused and academic practices are shaped by performativity and accountability. Within this system, students have been increasingly positioned as consumers whose choices are shaped as rational financial transaction-oriented to the ends of employability (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017). While student engagement pedagogies that aim to engender critical thinking and deep learning offset this rather bleak picture somewhat, measures such as the National Student Survey and the Teaching Excellence Framework use performance management systems to promote competition in a system that privileges institutional prestige and status. In this context, in which a university degree comes to matter as a form of capital, then assessment becomes a crucial technology through which students are positioned in the market and through which they are encouraged to see themselves as entrepreneurial citizens.

Assessment in higher education has always been entangled with power. Assessment is in the teacher's hands and gives them the tools (through written forms such as exams, assignments, and essays, and oral forms such as presentations and vivas) to discriminate and judge based on criteria that the teachers themselves set in originating and developing 'their' modules or inherit from their predecessors in modules they take over. However, whether summative or formative, assessment is generally considered a legitimate mode of academics' authority; its deployment is rarely questioned (undergraduates in the UK are used to being routinely assessed from early years education onwards); and ownership of the implementation of assessment (type of assessment, when it happens, where and how) is also a matter for the teacher. It is true that the last 15 years have seen some softening of the disciplinary power of assessment: for example, there has been a shift from assessment of learning to assessment for learning (Sambell 2008); there is increasing diversity and commitment to experiential and practical forms of assessment (Bloxham 2008); there is greater recognition of the need to involve students in curriculum co-creation (Bovill 2020); and there is a greater interest in feedback and formative assessment in student learning (Pryor and Crossouard 2008). Despite this, it is still the case that assessment in HE works as a practice which individualises, regulates and hierarchises. Raaper (2019, 4) summarises higher education assessment as gate-keeper, a form of 'personal

and institutional currency' and a practice in which grades are accepted as 'a measure of worth to oneself and others'. Assessment matters deeply in higher education.

How can posthumanism help us think and enact assessment in a more relational, caring response-able mode? This question requires us to unpick the traditional framing of assessment as a necessary teacherly practice to measure educational progress in relation to criteria that themselves are 'apparently' neutral and objective. This formulation erases the fact that assessment is human intervention, a series of cuts. A posthuman lens invites a look at assessment as a material-discursive apparatus – a material configuration that produces differential mattering (Gourlay 2021), which has worldly consequences for those entangled within them. Pedagogies of the mattering can, we contend, utilise insights from Barad (2007), Bennett (2010), Braidotti (2013) and Haraway (2016) to construct and enact assessment as a more open-ended, material practice that pays better attention to the situated particularities of students' learning journeys and takes better care of their developing subjectivities as learners. There are a number of practical things that we can experiment with enacting assessment differently in pedagogies of mattering. The first is to try to diminish the notion that assessment is something that is 'done to' students. Posthumanism encourages us to position assessment as, instead, a material-discursive doing. This entails designing assessments in which students have a stake, in which what is assessed does not appear as if it were a disembodied thing that exists 'outside' or 'beyond' them but as a process in which they can participate in meaningful ways. There are, as noted previously, shifts to more creative modes of assessment, but the challenge is to push this further to enable an assessment to become an intra-active mattering – to move beyond assessment as something which is considered as primarily cognitive, rational and technical toward a more complex understanding of affective, embodied, and relational processes. This means making assessment a more lively affair by enfolded into it the things that matter to students. This, of course, means we may need to take time and create space to get to know and appreciate students' lives and contexts beyond the classroom. However, if that is possible, then assessment might become a means for students to embody and affectively experience knowledge, rather than seeing it as an impossible to attain standard external to them.

The second builds on this first: move assessment from its usual situation at the end and disperse it through the unit or module. This does not necessarily mean it becomes merely formative; not it does mean you as the teacher have to assess many smaller components. Dispersing assessment could be an opportunity to train students to assess particular aspects of their own work and/or of each others' work. If done properly, this could be a profound lesson in skills development, trust, integrity and relational ethics. Self and peer assessments are challenging for both students and teachers and require pedagogic work to overcome respectively entangled histories of judgement and being judged. The pay-off can be profound in jolting us out of transmission modes of learning and into riskier spaces in which coming to know a hands-on process of engaging with how assessment materialises through practices of close reading, reflection and evaluation. It also brings to the fore that the criteria by which assessment occurs are human constructions and may open the way to the design of different criteria and more critical questioning (why is this assessed and not that? How can we assess that and do it justice?). The question for us as teachers is – do we trust ourselves enough to pass the job of assessment over to students and do we trust our students enough to do it properly? The fact that

many of us would answer in the negative is perhaps the continuing legacy of what the externalising power of assessment practices has done to us.

The two suggestions here would go some way to ensuring that assessment practices come to matter differently as key technologies which govern student experience and outcomes. (For an extended account of where these practices were enacted in a third-year undergraduate module, see Taylor 2018). In taking their place within pedagogies of mattering, these more relational and ethically affirmative assessment practices hold the promise of giving students a greater voice in their educational experiences and of engaging students in new ways of producing knowledge. In re-working assessment, pedagogies of mattering can open up higher education to more creative modes of learning which shift away from individualisation, division and hierarchy. When the assessment is shaped as a mode of situated relationalities, then learning becomes a more lively mattering.

### **The power of pedagogies of mattering**

This paper has suggested that pedagogies of mattering offer new ways in which to understand the breadth of actors which impact our learning and teaching relationships, and which shape the conditions and experiences of care. We have explored three dimensions of pedagogies of mattering: curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment, and considered some of the practical ways in which pedagogies of mattering might be enacted. Pedagogies of mattering expand the scope of what matters to include a multiplicity of human and nonhuman actors; it draws attention to how these actors are situated together in relational practices and it urges detailed attention to micro-level events. In drawing attention to how both the material and the discursive matter in all learning and teaching contexts, pedagogies of mattering conceptually expand the current framing of relational pedagogies in some important ways. It offers new insights into: how learning is experienced; how staff and students' relations are entangled with care; and how the affective informs the everyday life of higher education institutions. These insights are important in producing opportunities for connection and fostering engagement through attending to the power of the material. Pedagogies of mattering illuminate how teaching and learning relations are entangled with matters of power, and how inequalities are produced through the relations of bodies, spaces and materialities. This may enable us to cast a keener eye on not just seeing but addressing the inequalities which pervade student-staff relations and institutions. At the very least, pedagogies of mattering can foster more caring and ethical ways of working with students by encouraging us to notice our institutions and learning spaces anew: as assemblages where heterogeneous bodies, human and nonhuman, social, material, connect and interact and in which, through their continual flux, positive change (if not transformation) can take hold.

### **Conclusions**

This article has suggested that a posthuman theorisation of pedagogies of mattering offers new directions for understanding care, connection and the relational in HE. Specifically, pedagogies of mattering enable us to reconceptualise relations as a more-than-human concern, to surface and problematise the inequalities that underpin concepts of student engagement, as well as to explore enriched ways of enacting relational



pedagogies. Pedagogies of mattering can be put to work, we suggest, by educators who wish to explore HE from a new lens, in order to surface the micro-moments of learning and teaching, to foster more ethical ways of working and to seek to create more affirmative relationships in HE. As a result, there are many opportunities for further research, and pedagogies of mattering could be used as a generative frame to inform future work that attends to the fine-grained, day-to-day practices of learning and teaching. Pedagogies of mattering extend the important work prioritising relational pedagogies in higher education. Crucially, it brings into view the material aspects of learning and teaching, which are often overlooked and deemed insignificant, and yet, as we have seen, are actually powerful actors in shaping our experiences and agency as learners and educators.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Karen Gravett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3767-5098>

Carol A. Taylor  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0914-8461>

Nikki Fairchild  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8640-2710>

## References

- Ahmed, S. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Alaimo, S., and S. Hekman. 2008. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Barad, K. 2003. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs* 28 (3): 801–831.
- Barad, K. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Barad, K. 2014. "Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-apart." *Parallax* 20: 168–187.
- Barnacle, R., and G. Dall'Alba. 2017. "Committed to Learn: Student Engagement and Care in Higher Education." *Higher Education Research & Development* 36: 1326–1338.
- Bennett, J. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Biggs, J., and C. Tang. 2011. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University. What the Student Does*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.
- Bloxham, S. 2008. "How Can We Use Assessment to Support Transitions Into and Through Higher Education?" Keynote Presentation at the *Transitions and Transformations: Developing Learners and Learning Environments Conference*. Edge Hill University.
- Bottrell, D., and C. Manathunga. 2019. *Resisting Neoliberalism in Higher Education Volume 1: Seeing Through the Cracks*. Cham: Palgrave Critical University Studies.
- Bovill, C. 2020. *Co-creating Learning and Teaching: Towards Relational Pedagogy in Higher Education*. St Albans: Critical publishing.
- Bozalek, V., A. Bayat, D. Gachago, S. Motala, and V. Mitchell. 2018. "A Pedagogy of Response-ability." In *Socially Just Pedagogies: Posthumanist, Feminist and Materialist Perspectives in Higher Education*, edited by V. Bozalek, R. Braidotti, T. Shefer, and M. Zembylas, 97–112. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bozalek, V., and M. Zembylas. 2017. "Towards a Response-able Pedagogy Across Higher Education Institutions in Post-apartheid South Africa: An Ethico-Political Analysis." *Education as Change* 21 (2): 62–85.
- Braidotti, R. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.



- Braidotti, R., and S. Bignall. 2019. *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process After Deleuze*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Burke, K., and S. Larmar. 2020. "Acknowledging Another Face in the Virtual Crowd: Reimagining the Online Experience in Higher Education Through an Online Pedagogy of Care." *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2020.1804536
- The Care Collective. 2020. *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*. London: Verso.
- Coole, D. H., and S. Frost. 2010. *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Deleuze, G. 1997. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Doll, W. E. 1993. *A Post-modern Perspective on Curriculum*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Ecclestone, K. 2012. "From Emotional and Psychological Well-being to Character Education: Challenging Policy Discourses of Behavioural Science and 'Vulnerability'." *Research Papers in Education* 27 (4): 463–480.
- Fairchild, N. 2017. "Segments and Stutters: Early Years Teachers and Becoming-professional." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 18 (3): 294–307.
- Fairchild, N., and C. A. Taylor. 2019. "Karen Barad." In Atkinson, P., Delamont, S., Cernat, A., Sakshaug, J. W. and Williams, R. A. Eds. SAGE Research Methods Foundations [online]. Accessed 4 October 2019. <http://methods.sagepub.com/foundations/barad-karen>.
- Felten, P., and L. Lambert. 2020. *Relationship-rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Ferrando, F. 2019. *Philosophical Posthumanism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gilligan, C. 1982. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goodson, I. F. 1994. *Studying Curriculum: Cases and Methods*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gourlay, L. 2021. *Posthumanism and the Digital University*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Gourlay, L., and M. Oliver. 2018. *Student Engagement in the Digital University: Sociomaterial Assemblages*. London: Routledge.
- Gourlay, L., and J. Stevenson. 2017. "Teaching Excellence in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives." *Teaching in Higher Education* 22 (4): 391–395.
- Gravett, K., and R. Ajjawi. 2021. "Belonging as Situated Practice." *Studies in Higher Education*. doi:10.1080/03075079.2021.1894118
- Gravett, K., and I. M. Kinchin. 2020. "Revisiting 'A Teaching Excellence for the Times we Live in': Posthuman Possibilities." *Teaching in Higher Education* 25 (8): 1028–1034.
- Gravett, K., I. M. Kinchin, and N. E. Winstone. 2020. "More Than Customers: Conceptions of Students as Partners Held by Students, Staff, and Institutional Leaders." *Studies in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1623769>
- Gravett, K., and N. E. Winstone. 2020. "Making Connections: Alienation and Authenticity Within Students' Relationships in Higher Education." *Higher Education Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1842335>
- Haraway, D. J. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575–599.
- Haraway, D. J. 1997. *Modest\_witness@second\_millennium. FemaleMan©\_meets\_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Haraway, D. J. 2004. *The Haraway Reader*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Haraway, D. 2016. *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Higgins, M., F. G. Wallace, and J. Bazzul. 2019. "Staying with the Trouble in Science Education: Towards Thinking With Nature – A Manifesto." In *Posthumanism and Higher Education: Reimagining Pedagogy, Practice and Research*, edited by C. A. Taylor, and A. Bayley, 155–164. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Hultman, K., and H. Lenz Taguchi. 2010. "Challenging Anthropocentric Analysis of Visual Data: A Relational Materialist Methodological Approach to Educational Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23 (5): 525–542.
- Kinchin, I. 2020. "Care as a Threshold Concept for Teaching in the Salutogenic University." *Teaching in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1704726>
- Lygo-Baker, S., I. M. Kinchin, and N. E. Winstone. 2019. *Engaging Student Voices in Higher Education: Diverse Perspectives and Expectations in Partnership*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mulcahy, D. 2018. "Assembling Spaces of Learning 'In' Museums and Schools: A Practice-Based Sociomaterial Perspective." In *Spaces of Teaching and Learning, Understanding Teaching-learning Practice*, edited by E. Ellis, and P. Goodyear, 13–29. Singapore: Springer.
- Murphy, M. 2015. "Unsettling Care: Troubling Transnational Itineraries of Care in Feminist Health Practices." *Social Studies of Science* 45 (5): 717–737.
- Morris, K., and C. Borcherds. 2019. "Body as Transformer: 'Teaching Without Teaching' in a Teacher Education Course." In *Posthumanism and Higher Education: Reimagining Pedagogy, Practice and Research*, edited by C. A. Taylor, and A. Bayley, 1–27. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Noddings, N. 2005. *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. 2012. "The Caring Relation in Teaching." *Oxford Review of Education* 38: 771–781.
- Pryor, J., and B. Crossouard. 2008. "A Socio-cultural Theorisation of Formative Assessment." *Oxford Review of Education* 34 (1): 1–20.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. 2017. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Raaper, R. 2019. "Students as Consumers? A Counter Perspective from Student Assessment as a Disciplinary Technology." *Teaching in Higher Education* 24 (1): 1–16.
- Richardson, J. T. E., J. Mittelmeier, and B. Rienties. 2020. "The Role of Gender, Social Class and Ethnicity in Participation and Academic Attainment in UK Higher Education: An Update." *Oxford Review of Education* 46 (3): 346–362.
- Sambell, K. 2008. "Getting Involved: What Can We Learn From Student Perspectives of Assessment for Learning?" Keynote Presentation at the *Transitions and Transformations: Developing Learners and Learning Environments Conference*. Edge Hill University.
- Slattery, P. 2006. *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era: Teaching and Learning in an Age of Accountability*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Taylor, C. A. 2018. "Each Intra-Action Matters: Towards a Posthuman Ethics for Enlarging Response-ability in Higher Education Pedagogic Practice-ings." In *Socially Just Pedagogies: Posthumanist, Feminist and Materialist Perspectives in Higher Education*, edited by V. Bozalek, R. Braidotti, T. Shefer, and M. Zembylas, 81–96. London: Bloomsbury.
- Taylor, C. A., and N. Fairchild. 2020. "Towards a Posthumanist Institutional Ethnography: Viscous Matterings and Gendered Bodies." *Ethnography and Education*. doi:10.1080/17457823.2020.1735469
- Taylor, C. A., N. Fairchild, M. Koro-Ljungberg, A. Benozzo, N. Carey, and C. Elmenhorst. 2019. "Improvising Bag Choreographies: Disturbing Normative Ways of Doing Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 25 (1): 17–25.
- Taylor, C. A., S. Gannon, G. Adams, H. Donaghue, S. Hannam-Swain, J. Harris-Evans, J. Healey, and P. Moore. 2020. "Grim Tales: Meetings, Matterings and Moments of Silencing and Frustration in Everyday Academic Life." *International Journal of Educational Research*. doi:10.1016/j.ijer.2019.101513
- Walker-Gleaves, C. 2019. "Is Caring Pedagogy Really so Progressive? Exploring the Conceptual and Practical Impediments to Operationalizing Care in Higher Education." In *Higher Education and Hope: Institutional, Pedagogical and Personal Possibilities*, edited by P. Gibbs, and A. Peterson, 93–112. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wolfe, C. 2016. *Posthuman Ethics*. London: Routledge.