

Book review

Leibowitz, B., Bozalek, V. and Kahn, P. (eds.) 2017. *Theorising learning to teach in higher education*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

ISBN978-1-138-67727-2. Pbk. xxii + 237 pp.

Reviewing this edited collection was in some ways a challenge as, although I have knowledge of the theories addressed in it, I do not pretend to find them comfortable companions. The book was invaluable, therefore, in enabling me to gain a stronger understanding of these concepts and how they can be used to gain different insights into learning, to support academics in developing their teaching and to theorise academic development. I agree with Brenda Leibowitz that the theories in this book are not used, commonly, to inform learning to teach in higher education; they are philosophies of social science and ‘not intended to be theories of learning’ (p. 196). Reframing them, in order to clarify how they could be employed usefully in offering different perspectives on learning and, consequently, the practices of ‘learning to teach’, was necessary for me and, overall, the book assisted in that process.

The book is divided into 4 parts and has 14 chapters. The first 3 parts focus on 3 theoretical approaches that are claimed to be ‘less mainstream in the scholarly literature’ (p. 4), sociomaterialism, critical realism and social practice theory. Each section begins with a chapter that provides an overview of the theoretical/philosophical perspective, for example, sociomaterialism and, although these articulations may be challenging to the less well informed reader, such as me, the subsequent chapters that offer different examples of how the theory can be used to inform practice are enlightening and enlivening. The contributions are written in different styles and, in addition, offer different interpretations of the theories – all of which I enjoyed and found valuable. The fourth section, ‘Crossover perspectives’, provides a strong ending to the book as, as implied by the title, the authors, examine the advantages of the similarities in the 3 theoretical approaches in informing ‘learning to teach’. Interpretations of the theories may differ but there are extrapolations from each that unify them. One example is that teaching is less about an individual and what s/he does than about the social practices in which s/he engages. Others focus on theorising higher education as a site of social justice and using the theories to contribute to a stronger conceptualisation of widening access to higher education, crucial in the 21st century university.

In a book of 14 chapters it is impractical to comment on every one and therefore, perhaps unwise to single out some for special mention; nonetheless, I have done so. Those chapters that spoke to me rather more than some others resonated with current interests and personal values and beliefs and/or did so because I found the style in which they were written engaging and accessible or even demanding. As I am currently involved in a research project

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with colleagues in South Africa, for example, I found myself drawn to those chapters from that context, especially Chapter 3, which uses diffractive methodology to analyse an interview with a South African vice-chancellor that ‘glowed’ and Chapter 13 which analyses a workgroup in a South African university using the three theoretical lens to ‘heighten the ground for a theoretical crossover’ (p. 209). For different reasons, I found Chapter 4, the final one of the sociomaterialism section which focuses on digital learning in higher education and the hidden ontologies and power of digital technologies, fascinating. Chapter 6, a dialogue between two critical friends, Marie Manidis and Keiko Yasukawa, clarified for me how theories of social practice can be used to explain teaching in higher education and I enjoyed Brenda Leibowitz’s transparent grappling with less familiar concepts in Chapter 12.

A strength of a book such as this is that it reminds me of the importance of reflecting critically on my own higher education context, espoused theoretical perspectives on learning and, by implication, practices of teaching. Like the authors, I consider it important to theorise what I do as a teacher and to be able to explain the underlying philosophies of those theories and so I relished the challenge to investigate less familiar concepts. I cannot pretend that I had ever considered certain practices as being sociomaterialist or critical realist or falling into a version of social practice theory. For example, I have always cared about students, making a point of using their names, striving to ensure their engagement in the pedagogical practices that I facilitate, caring about their well-being. I have never, however, conceptualised such emotions and behaviours as ‘ongoing sociomaterial accomplishment’ (p. 103). For me they have been informed, initially by humanistic philosophy and student-centred approaches to learning and teaching and, more latterly, postmodernism. Thinking about what I feel and do, within a different conceptual framework does not mean that I have to adopt it but I find it enjoyable and invigorating. As I write this, however, I tend to agree with Paul Ashwin who, in the final chapter, highlights that the absence of other theories, in particular those that have been dominant in informing learning and teaching in higher education in the ‘Western’ world, can lead the reader to conclude that the contributors are critical of them and reject them. He emphasises the importance of engaging in dialogue between different perspectives rather than privileging some over others and thus perpetuating the hegemonic practices that all contributors to this book eschew.

I would have welcomed contributions from those outside of the UK, South Africa or Australia. One or two contributions from those from a Confucian heritage context, for example, would perhaps have led to problematising of the 3 theoretical approaches with regard to their suitability for such a context. Similarly, in a book that has as its focus ‘theorising learning to teach’, some consideration of indigenous perspectives would have been a useful addition as ‘If the epistemological diversity of the world is to be accounted for, other theories must be developed and anchored in other epistemologies-the epistemologies that adequately account for the realities of the global south’ (De Sousa Santos, 2012: 43). Reading this book alongside another that I am reviewing ‘Culturally responsive pedagogy: working towards decolonization, indigeneity and interculturalism’, for example, I detect elements in the latter that could, in my opinion, have been included to advantage, one such being Red Pedagogy - Native American social and political thought.

Finally, the book will be of interest to those who care about their teaching in higher education and to those who work in academic development, as do several of the contributors.

In addition, those whose area of research is the scholarship of learning and teaching in higher education will find it invaluable. Academic work that raises the profile of university teaching is crucial and this edited collection makes a significant contribution to that canon. As the editors state in their Preface ‘teaching is vitally important, and theorising learning to teach is, indeed, extremely valuable and important’ (p. xxi). Agreed!

References

- De Sousa Santos, B. 2012. Public sphere and epistemologies of the South. *Africa Development XXXVII*, 1, 43-67
- Pirbhai-Illich, F., Pete, S. and Martin, F. (eds.) 2017. *Culturally responsive pedagogy: working towards decolonization, indigeneity and interculturalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

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