

## **AUTHOR ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT: JENNY LEWIN-JONES**

Dominant Discourses in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives, Cartographies and Practice

By IAN M. KINCHIN and KAREN GRAVETT (2022)

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The authors of this book set out to challenge dominant discourses in higher education. They argue that terms such as “student-centred”, “teaching excellence”, “resilience”, and “employability” (p. 6) have become sacred and unquestioned, shutting down discussion of ideas and creating what they call “the oxymoronic ‘thoughtless university’” (p. 9). Although written from a UK perspective, the book is underpinned by the authors’ belief that teaching and learning should be a “thoughtful endeavour” (p. 5), and so will appeal to a wider audience of like-minded readers, particularly those interested in a fresh application of theoretical approaches.

Ten chapters are clustered into three parts: Part 1 ‘Considering the landscape’; Part 2 ‘Putting Theory to Work’; Part 3 ‘Emerging Polyvalent Lines of Flight’. Part 1 introduces theoretical concepts permeating the book, drawn from “a number of ‘post’ thinkers” (p. 23). Indeed, a strength of this book is its illumination of what is meant by postqualitative, poststructuralist, and posthumanist approaches, providing insights into the thinking of (among others) Deleuze and Guattari, Barad, Braidotti, and St. Pierre. A central idea framing the book, as its title indicates, is Braidotti’s “cartographies” (p. 26), which the authors use to visualise how people inhabit and experience higher education in different and complex ways.

Part 2 applies these theories to contemporary practices in UK higher education. The authors argue that “student engagement”, “agency” and “voice” have become problematic blanket terms disassociated from material realities and individual students’ constraints (pp. 35-39). They build a case for challenging conventional linear narratives of students’ “trajectories and transitions into and through higher education”, with the associated ways of understanding “success” (pp. 57-58). They argue that what are framed as “benign” narratives can perpetuate inequalities (p. 60). An example is the taken-for-granted focus on “learning outcomes”, which the authors state “places no value on the personal route the student has taken to get from A to B” (p. 68). A strength of Part 2 lies in its analysis of the impact of outcomes-led approaches on both students and teachers, and the related restrictions on more complex relationships between types of knowledge and expertise. Importantly, the authors also illuminate possible alternatives.

Part 3 begins by presenting empirical work in Chapter 7: the authors recorded a series of discussions between teachers and educational researchers. Each discussion was stimulated by a higher education article on a topic representing a contested concept such as “teaching excellence”, “student engagement” and “resilience” (pp. 100-113). The authors present extracts from the debates, which were intended to put into practice their aim of encouraging teachers and researchers to take time for reflection and scholarly discussion. In Chapter 8, the authors return to the idea of cartographies, with graphically represented “concept mapping” showing relationships between ideas (p. 115). They suggest that using visualisations with concepts in boxes can “open up a dialogue to explore links” (p.127), while emphasising that concept maps are not meant to “tame confusion and complexity” (p. 129). They thereby recognise the need to address possible tension between their dynamic rhizomatic philosophical approach and what might appear to be the fixed representation in concept maps. In chapter 9, the two authors present a dialogue with each other, exploring the challenges posed by their “messy” research approaches (pp. 146-148). In the final chapter (10), they offer some ways forward for teachers in higher education, advocating “a focus on the situated, localised and granular context of the individual” (p. 167).

At the start of the book, the authors directly encourage those engaged in higher education research and practice to “think differently” (p. 15). The varied chapter styles (particularly in Part 3) could potentially disconcert readers. However, the structure of the book reflects the authors’ philosophical perspectives: they engage in dialogue with each other and with the texts they use, enacting and experimenting with the theoretical approaches they advocate. Approaching their topic as “rhizomatic researchers” (p. 15), they explore connections, assemblages and entanglements. It is a deliberately unsettling book, in which the authors probe how their own subjectivities are shaped by discourses they seek to question. This collaborative book emerges from dialogues which are personal to the two authors, yet which are likely to “resonate with many” (p. 4).

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