Encouraging critique: a stimulating and provocative examination of dominant discourses in the higher education sector

Book review: Kinchin, I. M., and Gravett, K. (2022) *Dominant discourses in higher education: critical perspectives, cartographies and practice*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

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Overview

As noted in the title, this text seeks to explore dominant discourses in higher education, making use of critical perspectives, cartographies, and practice. The two authors come together from different disciplinary backgrounds to expose the neoliberal colonisation of dominant discourses through their own 'epistemological shudders' (p.4). In challenging the sanctity of terms such as 'widening participation', 'student voice', and 'employability' (p.6), the authors suggest that 'all aspects of university practice should be subject to regular scholarly critique' (p.6). The book is likely to be of interest to those working in the higher education sector, and particularly to learning developers who are seeking to explore, understand, and critique the pervasive narratives that underpin their work. Whilst the book does not centre on learning development, it does draw on a range of inter-related narratives, including learning gains, employability, and analytics.

Structure and content

The book comprises ten chapters, broken down into three sections: Part One 'Considering the landscape', Part Two 'Putting theory to work', and Part Three 'Emerging polyvalent lines of flight'.

Part One introduces us to a range of theoretical concepts that underpin the rest of the book. This includes the rejection of inhibitory notions of 'dualisms' and referring to simplistic binaries such as 'research and teaching' or 'academic and non-academic staff' (p.6), and a brief overview of the reductive nature of 'linearity' (p.8). This is likely to be of particular interest to learning developers, who may recognise how such binaries influence their professional identity (Johnson, 2018). Following this rejection of dualisms and linearity (instead favouring plurality and relationality) and a helpful overview of 'post' perspectives, the authors present a combination of Braidotti's notion of 'critical cartographies' (p.26), Manthunga and Bottrell's 'polyvalent lines of enquiry' (p.28), and Taylor's 'patchiness in higher education' (p.28). A key strength of Part One is the clarity and systematic exploration of theoretical approaches, guiding the reader towards a broad, nuanced, and complex bricolage of the tools the authors go on to use throughout the book.

Part Two does exactly as the title suggests, 'putting theory to work' through the application of theory to educational practice. The authors start by suggesting that 'taken for granted' dominant discourses about students 'may not always bear much resemblance to the day-to-day lives of 'real' students' (p.33) and as such, they need to be deconstructed. Throughout the remainder of Part Two, they explore pervasive narratives around student positionality, the university environment, ecologies of teaching and ecosystems of learning, and expertise in context. The authors challenge 'benign narratives' (p.60), advocating for 'experimentation of new ways of thinking about our university environments' (p.61) and suggest that existing discourse around knowledge and expertise 'impose a reductionist perspective' (p. 95). The discussion of expertise 'as a process of becoming' (p.81) and the epistemological flexibility required by staff will be of interest to learning developers who often have to 'navigate disciplinary borders' (p.81). The individual sections of Part Two have considerable overlap, though this is to be expected when deconstructing messy, nuanced, and pervasive discourses, and the authors do an admirable job of drawing together an overall narrative, whilst also highlighting the ways that readers might start to think differently about each topic.

Part Three initially moves away from the more theoretical aspects of Part One and Two, drawing on a series of conversations undertaken with teachers and educational researchers from a range of backgrounds. Recent higher education articles are used to launch the conversations, with topics chosen for their prominence and representation of

what the authors feel are the 'most troubling narratives affecting our work' (p.99). Extracts from three dialogues are published on topics relating to teaching excellence, student engagement, and resilience (pp.100-114). The next chapter returns to earlier discussions of cartographies, acknowledging that whilst concept mapping can 'tame confusion and complexity', the authors are more inclined to use critical cartographies as a method to 'provoke a novel view from an unaccustomed angle' (p.115). Somewhat unusually, Chapter Nine offers a dialogic exploration of the work of Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, before going on to outline some of the challenges for qualitative and post-qualitative researchers, including the 'real challenges . . . to thinking differently' (p.149). The final chapter 'Towards a relational pedagogy' summarises the text, acknowledging that 'there is no recipe for excellent teaching' (p.154), suggesting that we must instead move 'towards a perspective that considers a teaching and learning ecosystem as relational' (p.165). It feels challenging to summarise Part Three succinctly, likely due to the variance in the structure and content of each of the chapters. However, each chapter has its place in guiding readers through the sometimes 'messy qualitative research process' (p.134) that the authors experienced, endearing the authors to those of us who have engaged in similar research. On the flip side, it is possible that this perceived messiness in Part Three could alienate readers who prefer the clarity of binary or structured outcomes in academic research.

Summary

This text is likely to be a source of interest to those who work in the higher education sector, most notably teaching staff and learning developers. The authors encourage readers to unpick and critically assess the dominant and often homogenising discourses that underpin teacher, student, and institutional expectations of teaching and learning. Given the broad scope of discourses that the book covers, it could also be used to inform staff training and development courses, encouraging staff to problematise, challenge and explore what they believe to be known about teaching and learning in higher education. Although there is some crossover with the somewhat disruptive work of Jones (2022), Fleming (2021), and Grant (2021), this book offers readers an alternative way to critique university discourses, drawing on tools such as concept mapping and conversational research to destabilise entrenched assumptions. Readers are likely to put the book down

feeling challenged, unsettled, and reflective – a sign that the authors have successfully facilitated the 'fruitful disorientation' that they themselves experienced and embraced (p.4).

References

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