

Going Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education: Introducing an Intra-active Pedagogy.

Hillevi Lenz-Taguchi.

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Introduction

This book is the seventh in the series *Contesting Early Childhood*, edited by Gunilla Dahlberg and Peter Moss. The aim of the series is to contest dominant discourses prevalent in early childhood education. Another aim is to show that there are alternatives and that the dominant discourses are always only some of many choices.

The author, Hillevi Lenz-Taguchi, is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Stockholm University. Her primary body of published work has been based on her experiences using pedagogical documentation as a methodological tool for learning and change with preschool and primary teachers. This work, which is steeped in feminist poststructural theory and educational practices, embraces reflexive, deconstructionist collaboration with colleagues and is the underlying research for the book *Going Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education: Introducing an Intra-active Pedagogy*.

Lenz-Taguchi introduces a number of challenging perspectives and provocations in this volume. Her explicit aim is to “trouble and challenge what is going on in the education arena today, where pedagogical practices are being increasingly mainstreamed and normalised” (p. 4). Lenz-Taguchi’s approach innovatively offers a number of theoretical perspectives and philosophical works.

Overview

Lenz-Taguchi draws greatly on the work of feminist physicist Karen Barad (2007) as she introduces her ideas about an *intra-active pedagogy*. As she understands it, an intra-active pedagogy shifts attention from intra-personal and interpersonal relationships toward an intra-active relationship between all living organisms and the material environment such as objects and artefacts, spaces and places. She also describes in depth the notion of *onto-epistemology*, an interdependent and intertwined relationship between theories of being (ontology) and theories of knowing (epistemology). Exploring these concepts and their relationship to both learning and teaching is at the core of this book.

Immersed in this “onto-epistemological world view” (p. 42), Lenz-Taguchi challenges binary divides such as theory/practice, science/philosophy, reality/discourse, and nature/culture, explaining how they influence under-

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standings about learning and encouraging the reader to go beyond such thinking. These ideas are unpacked as the author moves between theoretical pondering and discussing examples from teaching practice.

Lenz-Taguchi presents new considerations of material objects and their importance using the term *performative agency* to describe the roles that objects such as sticks, water, and clay take on in their intra-action with children and learning events. The notion of intra-activity, as Lenz-Taguchi understands it, highlights the significance of materials, expanding on the idea of interactivity, which might be understood primarily as related to actions between people. Building on these concepts, she considers the role of pedagogical documentation as having performative agency, indicating that “the photograph, sketch, or written words of an observation will also put things in motion by means of its own agentic force and materiality. Thus, new possibilities for intra-action with other matter and organisms will emerge” (p. 64).

Lenz-Taguchi introduces philosophical ideas from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to frame her exploration of ethics from an onto-epistemological perspective. She offers the reader a series of thought-provoking questions that highlight the significance between perspectives of learning and teaching and the ethical ramifications of these decisions.

Organization

This book is organized into seven chapters that trace Lenz-Taguchi’s evolving thinking about learning and teaching in early childhood education. The context for her writing is early childhood programs in Sweden. Both her research collaborators and her audience include early childhood teachers and university students. Throughout she explores ideas and perspectives, using a range of vignettes to examine events and how these have informed her thinking.

Each chapter is carefully outlined with main points, proposed questions, and identification of the theories on which the author draws. As Lenz-Taguchi writes, she details events as they unfold and then critiques them in the light of new learnings and understandings. Concepts that are explored in other sections of the book are cross-referenced, with the author continually linking to the vignettes that she describes. In a densely theoretical work, the positioning of these vignettes is helpful for being able to practically consider working directly with children.

In Chapter 1, Lenz-Taguchi considers theory/practice and discourse/matter divides, challenging these binaries in order to invite exploration of new possibilities. The connections and interrelationships between and within binaries are highlighted. Drawing on physicist Barad’s (2007) understanding, the power of material objects as “performative agents” is emphasized. This notion of intra-activity, significant in Lenz-Taguchi’s thinking, is further elaborated.

The theoretical ideas proposed in Chapter 1 are linked more specifically to learning contexts in Chapter 2. A major focus of this chapter is on understanding learning for an “onto-epistemological world view” (p. 42) and how this reframing affects pedagogical practice. The accompanying examples or vignettes help to provide a context for understanding the possibilities and limitations of this theoretical orientation. Groundwork is laid to question the

often unrecognized assumptions that underlie decisions that are made about curriculum.

In Chapters 3 and 4, the focus is on Reggio Emilia-inspired pedagogical documentation and how it can be used as a tool for learning and transformation. The practice of observing and documenting in the preschool practices in Reggio Emilia is described by Reggio pedagogue Rinaldi (2006) as a “listening made visible as traces of the learning event in written notes, photographs, videos, etc.” (p. 68). Children, students, and teacher educators use pedagogical documentation to understand their own learning and to critique dominant habits of thinking and doing. Lenz-Taguchi is offering here something completely new: an understanding that pedagogical documentation can be understood as a movement or force that creates a space that makes lived pedagogical practices material. “It is the material films, images, observations, etc., that make up the documentation that together construct such a space where intra-active phenomena between children, concepts and materials can emerge and be actualized” (p. 66). Further, Lenz-Taguchi suggests that pedagogical documentation can be described as an “apparatus of knowing that produces different kinds of knowledge depending on the ontological and/or epistemological perspectives” (p. 18).

Drawing again on the theoretical work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), new insights are explored. For example, Lenz-Taguchi introduces the concept of *becoming-minoritarian*, which she interprets as discussing the ethics involved when engaging in the process of reliving and reenacting a pedagogical event with the help of pedagogical documentation.

Chapters 5 and 6 draw significantly on the work that Lenz-Taguchi and her colleagues have undertaken in Stockholm to reconceptualize teacher education in university contexts. Although the flow of ideas from the earlier chapters is revisited here, the ideas relate more specifically to educators in such settings. Mathematic, musical, and academic writing contexts with preservice teachers are woven throughout to link some difficult concepts to practical situations.

As the book closes, in Chapter 7, Lenz-Taguchi engages with the concept of an ethics of immanence, asking, “What are the ethical consequences of different theories of learning and development that belong to different ontologies and epistemologies?” (p. 160). Linking back to earlier chapters, she offers several readings of the ethical and pedagogical ramifications of various learning theories and social constructivist perspectives. She then offers a rereading of the example used in this chapter from the framework of an intra-active pedagogy. Building on her understanding of Deleuzian ethics, Lenz-Taguchi proposes that what we are interested in “is what an organism, a child, a teacher, a preschool, a learning event can become in its intra-activity with the surrounding world” (p. 176).

Reflections and Recommendations

Lenz-Taguchi has introduced some challenging thoughts, plunging the reader deeply into philosophical exposure to some big ideas that are not in the common realm or experience of most educators. However, the theories are relevant and exciting, well worthy of consideration. She has made a concentrated effort to make her way of understanding accessible by the examples she incorporates

throughout the book and has provided references for readers who choose to explore in further depth.

In particular, Lenz-Taguchi's writing about pedagogical documentation breaks new ground theoretically. The detailed consideration of a range of philosophical perspectives posed by Barad and Deleuze and Guattari give a new depth and richness to understanding the power and potential that pedagogical documentation offers both as a research tool and as a strategy for making learning visible.

Lenz-Taguchi has set out to ask the reader to go against what she sees as dominant reductive and simplifying and limiting forces in education, and challenges us to ask, "What can I do?" Her aim is to show "how thinking and living in pedagogical practices is an entwined material-discursive business which will make us think about and perform our work differently" (p. 90). I believe that she succeeds in achieving this goal in this work.

It has been my personal experience of the last number of years that the most philosophically engaging educational conversations are taking place in early-years communities. This book reinforces this opinion and will find a valuable audience with those, regardless of teaching context, who are keen to take on new ideas and broaden their philosophical explorations. It is a book that would be well suited to discussion with others, perhaps for a professional reading group.

References

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
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