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Educational relational networks: indigenous and feminist worlding. A response to Troy Richardson

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a response to Troy Richardson's Terence McLaughlin's Lecture. In it, I discuss how Richardson provides a unique reading of relationality, drawing together technology studies, Indigenous Education and feminist philosophy of education. Seeking to walk with key ideas he develops, this response also points to a possible limitation in seeing Noddings ethic of care as part of a feminist relational ontology that can help inform new ways of understanding 'machine learning'. In particular, I introduce the notion of worlding as a way of complementing Richardson's reading of relationality – a notion that has profound implications for pedagogical practice.

It is one of the privileges of being president that I am able to choose the Terence McLaughlin lecture, named after the first president of INPE. Troy Richardson is someone whose work I have not only longed to engage and respond to – but who also can bring something to enrich our conversations and challenge business as usual within the field. Richardson is to be thanked for offering a reading of relationality that is quite unique and complex. His paper invites us to walk an untrodden path, introducing not only the possibility but the necessity of threading our ideas of relationality into how we currently exist in and through the matrix of 'machine learning' and colonisation.

This, to me is a bold move on many levels. First, it challenges the ways our own field, philosophy of education, has omitted, or obscured concerns of Indigenous peoples. He brings the issue of relationality into focus in order to address this and outlines the overlaps, alignments, and differences with feminist scholarship in the field. Thus, he introduces us to key issues that resonate with work done in the areas of relational ontology, particularly from feminist and decolonial perspectives. In other words, I see Richardson's essay as pushing against the parochialism of philosophy of education by engaging in an alternative conversation where 'other' practices and modes of thought matter

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beyond the western fathers with whom our discipline remains deeply enamoured.

Secondly, it calls into question what we mean by 'relationality' itself in a way that does not romanticise it. After all it is not some automatically 'positive' attribute or adjective one can simply add on to an already existing concept (such 'relational autonomy' or 'relational agency' or 'relational pedagogy') in order to indicate a more interpersonal, intersubjective, or social element than the original idea held. Instead, Richardson's deep dive into relationality is about revealing not an interaction between two but a dispersed, web-like network of multiple relations to reveal the underlying interdependence and interconnection that themselves generate new formations, pedagogical and otherwise.

Thirdly, it asks something of us that is quite demanding; that is, to consider how the very networked worlds that constitute our landscapes of living challenge any easy assertions of who *is* more relational (Indigenous people, women, and perhaps the environment itself) and who *is* less relational (Euro-americans, men, and technology). By probing what our living in networked worlds (in the plural) can mean for our understanding of Indigenous Education and feminist philosophy of education, Richardson carefully considers how these positions have not so much 'got it wrong' as one would find in standard critique, but in how to move affirmatively with them, taking the ideas generated through these positions on another journey, another path to see where they might lead if given a slight push in a different direction. My response to Richardson's thinking is a kind of walking along the path he creates, while taking some of his ideas along a side trail of my own.

Key to the development of his thought is shifting the grounds upon which we come to understand 'the relational.' His critique, if I might call it such, does not focus on its fuzziness, as the logics of Kantian rationality (which is the more frequent critique) might suggest. Instead, Richardson probes deeply into how it somehow isn't quite relational enough. Moving away from assigning 'ways of knowing' to members of entire communities, thereby 'ethnicizing' or 'feminicizing' patterns of reasoning, the point is to be able to conceive of a relationality that avoids the moralising tendencies embedded with the 'right or wrong' way of seeing/being in the world (Indigenous knowledge *versus* scientific knowledge, for instance). By maintaining the tension between the two, a space is opened up for considering how relations to land, place, and the more than human world can be more closely related to our networked lives and the algorithms that support them than we usually think.

In his section on feminist philosophy of education, Richardson develops a reading of Noddings' focus on care, seeing this as a 'relational ontology.' Her 'reconstruction' of patriarchal relations, Richardson suggests, sits in an uneasy relationship with indigenous epistemologies. The latter focusing on a given interspecies connection, while the former focuses on an 'instrumentality' of the reciprocal relationship of the one caring and the one cared for. Yet,

Richardson seeks to read them together in ways that suggest that both bring obligation toward the other as central to their ethico-epistemological commitments.

While I understand Richardson is seeking some affirmative and productive relation between feminism and indigenous positions, I wonder whether Noddings' work is the best choice here. In my view, relationality itself is not just about 'care' and the reciprocal (if asymmetrical) relations between subjects. When perceived from others who embrace a relational ontological framework, the (bodily) subject emerges from within a network of relations, and comes into being partially through processes, for instance, of genderisation and racialisation in ways that are oft-times deleterious to one's very being and becoming. Merely saying that we are involved in a relation does not erase the perniciousness of certain types of relations experienced under racist, patriarchal and techno-capitalist societies. So to 'be relational' means having to face the potential difficulties and violences such relationalities may bring; relationality is thus not a code word for 'care' between two already existing subjects. Moreover, I wonder if the reciprocal nature of Noddings' position (that the one cared for is required to respond in a particular way for the one caring in order for the latter to assume her full obligation), best serves the kind of interrelationality that most relational ontologists defend? Particularly those who understand relationality as a part of a network or web.

It is this web-like and vicissitudinal quality of relationality – that it can become part of the problem which it seeks to remedy – which demands that any talk about pedagogical forms or practices cannot be divorced from the very network of relationality through which those forms come into being. That is, if certain 'forms' are identified as central to education, they only arise out of relational processes that make them possible (for example, the form of a lecture or seminar emerges out of a web of complex relations, they are not merely events that 'produce' relations). So I'm interested in seeing here how 'forms' of encounter or interface are actually 'form*ations*' suggesting the processual nature of form itself. To be clear, it is not simply 'practices' that go into making forms, but about the 'relations' that go into generating those practices. This enables us to pose the question: Are the relations that create/support certain forms harmful to persons, to the environment, to the more than human world? In other words, a focus on relationality allows, us to question the underside of what it is we do when we teach.

This is key I think for understanding that some feminist philosophy of education along with some indigenous scholarship is focused on relations in ways that do not simply posit human reciprocity as a condition of our becoming, but that understand our implication in the worlds we co-generate through our environments. I am thinking of scholars who inform this work such as Vanessa Andreotti, Carl Mika, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour who all focus on the idea of 'worlding' – of how worlds are made out of the very

relational fields or networks that comprise our living lives with others, including animate beings and nonanimate entities. 'Worlding' to my mind works across the borders of indigenous scholarship, feminism, and technology studies, while moving beyond the limitations inherent in a relational ethic of care.

For instance, as Carl Mika (2017), a Maori educational philosopher observes, even colonisation constitutes part of worlding practices for indigenous peoples. For Mika, this is an educational point. Education is something you participate in as a co-constitutive element of worlding practices. The world is therefore not something that is fixed, or that we 'come into' as if we lived outside of it. Nor is it something to be 'studied' as entirely separate from the one who studies it. This does not mean 'I' am the same as it, or that things are not distinct from me, but through our encounters each comes into existence. For Mika, 'education' names these co-emergings, it fundamentally depicts a process of 'worlding' the world, of bringing the world into being as it simultaneously brings us into being with it.

This idea of worlding to my mind is close to the 'networked' relations that Richardson seeks to probe through 'machine learning' and especially what he refers to as its architecture. My question here is how does this architecture 'shape' our worlding relations? Given that we are already part of a web of interconnection that constitutes our 'reality,' to what degree does his investigation reveal the cracks of how we live in the world right here right now?

Artificial Neural Networks (ANNs) are not simply 'artificial' because they are created by humans, but because they are also 'copies' in the sense that humans have projected their anatomy onto these networks. The 'neural' – that is, that which pertains to the living nervous system – becomes the unit through which AI and machine learning are 'understood.' Neural networks become bodies without organs – generating forms of so-called 'learning' through which these networks make 'decisions' that programmers do not control. The issue at stake here is that in their decision-making processes, calculated through algorithmic weights and biases, ANNs put up with no ambiguity. The digital only knows 0 and 1. It codifies the world in a dualistic fashion. As Brian Massumi (2002) articulates it, the problem with the digital is not that it is 'artificial' or not 'real' in some way, but that it is not 'virtual' or open to potentiality; it can only work from a series of possibilities (in this case 0 or 1).

Why is all this important? If relational networks are seen through architectures of machine learning alone (and which reverse the projection back onto our bodies when we say our brains 'compute' 'are hard-wired' etc), we risk not taking into account the grey and messy areas of relationality that simply do not translate into a digital 0–1. Architectural interface cannot tolerate ambiguity and thus ANNs, while avoiding the human-centredness and ideas of reciprocity in Noddings' theory of relations we have seen above, are not innocent either since they operate to codify the world as one thing or another. Ironically, while these networks are complex systems, involving seemingly infinite algorithmic code, they cannot abide the complexity of living itself.

While I don't think Richardson's discussion advocates relationality as non-complex in this manner, it is important to think of pedagogical or educational formations that don't tie us into a digital worlding practice, through which ambiguity, liminality and complexity cannot be sustained. Instead, what Richardson's paper has provoked for me is the following question: how can we generate pedagogical formations that resist the tendencies of machine learning to reduce complexity, while acknowledging that each of us is very much part of these reductive relational networks?

I do not have any direct answers here, but there are some hints, perhaps, in Richardson's method: which is a walking alongside diverse positions on relationality in order to see not only where each of them takes us on their own, but where they can take us together. Which ideas affirm the kind of pedagogical formations – read: relations – that can sustain us through planetary crisis, for instance, and which are markedly destructive? Which ideas can we leave behind in order for us to walk more freely in pursuit of paths of worlding? As Richardson claims, the world of AI cannot tell us about the world of human cognition. They are not comparable. However, it is by walking us through the tensions that Richardson allows us to ask questions that we would not simply come to from within each of those domains on their own. It is this walking together that to my mind acts as a profound metaphor for how we can think of education and the staging of encounters that teachers engage in. Encounters that take seriously the sheer complexity of relationality in these networked times.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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