

# Review of Dissonant Methods: Undoing Discipline in the Humanities Classroom

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*Dissonant Methods: Undoing Discipline in the Humanities Classroom* by Ada S. Jaarsma and Kit Dobson (Eds.). Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 2020.

These days, I can usually tell how much a piece of research affects me by how many pictures I snap of its pages. These pictures populate the folders of my camera roll as vital reminders of intellectual provocations, of readings both underway and finished. Let me say, then, that I have quite the selection of saved images from *Dissonant Methods: Undoing Discipline in the Humanities Classroom*, edited by Ada S. Jaarsma and Kit Dobson. With contributions from across the Humanities, *Dissonant Methods* thinks through what methods of teaching are usable, generative, or appropriately destructive in the neoliberal university. The collection analyzes “how the organizing power of neoliberal forms can be compromised, rerouted or deflected through the inventive methods of teaching” (Jaarsma, p. xii). These methods, the book shows, are often dissonant, in that they produce moments of dissonance within the classroom, but also in their fundamental plurality, given the specific, context-driven nature of teaching and learning (Jaarsma, p. xiii). This titular concept, *dissonant methods*, provides the anchor for the collection, bringing together essays that model an “experimental humanities”: “an approach to inquiry that is based explicitly in praxis — in this case, the praxis of teaching” (Jaarsma, p. xv). A strength of the book is the prioritization of this methodology. It legitimizes the reality that, as educators, there is critical knowledge, theory, and lessons to be learned from *what we do* and not merely *what we read*.

The collection is divided into three sections, with Jaarsma’s Introduction and Dobson’s Afterword as bookends. Jaarsma’s Introduction establishes the focuses of the collection, including most notably its attention to *forms* of teaching, *dissonance* as teaching reality, and teaching in/against the *neoliberal university*. The introduction also situates the book within rich discussions in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), primarily through the book’s skepticism about the neoliberal “learnification” mode of higher education that Gert Biesta addresses in *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*.

Readers will find these concentrations and concerns throughout the collection: part one, “The Event,” frames teaching as an event — unpredictable, uncertain, dynamic, and repeatable but always with differences — and speaks to the possibilities of an “evental pedagogy” (Kinaschuk, p. 26). Kyle Kinaschuk’s contribution thoroughly examines evental pedagogy: he explores how teaching-as-event becomes risky, as it involves embracing uncertainty, vulnerability, and unpredictability. Teaching-as-event is also generative, however, as it encourages the teacher to respond to teaching conditions as they arise, without prioritizing pre-determined or “objective” instructional approaches seeking to universalize the pedagogical experience. Exemplifying Kinaschuk’s theorized evental pedagogy, Kathy Cawsey provides a compellingly-written case study demonstrating how literary analysis (in this case, of Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”) can generate critical engagement with real-world events (here, related to the Dalhousie University dentistry scandal in 2014).

In contrast to the other pieces in this section, Martin Shuster’s essay does not speak as explicitly to “the event,” so its position in this section remains, for me, a bit unclear. Perhaps the

link is in Shuster's reflections on the role of the philosophy classroom in preparing students "for the world" — and his provocation to "expand" (p. 11) the world for which we prepare students. That notion applies to the collection's overall concern with teaching against the pressures of neoliberalism. Finally, the first section ends with what the book calls an "intermezzo," one of two short pieces highlighting how students contribute to classroom experiences. In this intermezzo, Ely Shipley takes the reader through a writing exercise examining dissonance in/as poetic form, putting the reader in the learner's seat and, following the book's prioritization of praxis-based insights, showing how the practice of writing can be instructive.

Part two, "Embodiment," foregrounds the body as a critical dimension of teaching and learning. From this position, Katja K. Pettinen draws on methods of teaching taijutsu in North America to unsettle entrenched ideas about the usefulness of repetition, mimicry, and memorization in teaching and learning. She explicates a model of education that recognizes the expertise of the teacher, but also understands this expertise as something dynamic and changing rather than absolute (p. 73). Guy Obrecht's self-critical exploration of designing a music appreciation course likewise brings the body back in the scope of teaching and learning: his piece shows how bodies listen in different ways, and that these differences significantly shape the learning experience for each student. In the intermezzo that ends this section, Kaitlin Rothberger narrates the perspective of an undergraduate student negotiating mental illness within the ableist institution of the university: after all, she notes, so much teaching "presuppose[s] a student who is white, neurotypical, and male, and in classrooms such as these, I have very calmly gone mad" (p. 97).

The final section, "The Political," includes two crucial essays theorizing how anti-racist or anti-oppressive pedagogy and the teaching of postcolonial literature can produce dissonance, resistance, and uncertainty, often toward generative (though complicated) ends. Namrata Mitra discusses an activity in which she asks students to rewrite a passage from Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* using another character's perspective. Mitra's essay skillfully blends an account of a classroom activity educators can try with a rich analysis of the activity's relation to broader social issues, such as how history is written and how we talk about violence and harm (pp. 109-10). These issues are likewise at stake in Rachel Jones's piece, which studies the challenging dissonance that occurs when students push back on course content, including anti-racist and anti-oppressive concepts. Jones's essay complicates the notion of *dissonance* in the classroom. While she warns against a "moralizing pedagogy" (p. 120) that suppresses dissonance to implant the "correct" view into students' minds, she also recognizes that *staying with the dissonance* can threaten to become another neoliberal mechanism that serves only "to benefit the individual learner" (p. 123).

The final pages of the book include Kit Dobson's Afterword, which helpfully re-situates the book's conversations alongside other publications in SoTL, returns to reflect on the critical practice of "undoing discipline," and ties together the sections that organize the book. This final synthesis was enlightening for me: initially, I wondered how the Event, Embodiment, and the Political came to be anchors for the collection. I had trouble seeing how the topics cohered independently and together as one book. What are these groupings, I thought,

doing as *forms* to organize the insights collected within? After reading Dobson's synthesizing reflection, I wondered instead whether the dissonance I sensed across the structure of the book was deliberate — an expression of the theoretical and methodological dissonance with which the book engages. If, as Jaarsma writes in the introduction, "this collection seeks to disrupt any overly consonant message about teaching" (p. xv), then it makes sense that the three groupings are loose enough to allow for the dissonance and plurality that are central to the book's spirit. The intermezzos also work within this spirit, as their inclusion alongside more traditional pedagogical essays showcases the variety of forms and methods involved in teaching and learning.

Readers of this collection will find that it lives up to its title: it "undoes discipline" through the readership it invites. I am a scholar of literature, but I felt as energized and provoked by the contributions on teaching philosophy, music, creative writing, and martial arts as I did by those on teaching literature. The book's focus on the methods of teaching make it widely and, most crucial, *practically* applicable across disciplines. I suspect this collection will be of interest to a variety of educators — within the "Humanities Classroom," yes, but also those in Interdisciplinary schools and beyond, given the book's broad but sharp engagement with SoTL, embodied learning, evental pedagogy, and the politics of the classroom. Those who work administratively in teaching and learning centres or as curriculum/course developers would also find much use in this book's practical insights.

In this practical approach to troubling neoliberal logics of contemporary university teaching, this book would be complemented by titles that more generally confront the challenges of neoliberal academia. One example is *Life for the Academic in the Neoliberal University*, which contextualizes the teaching accounts in *Dissonant Methods* by offering a history of the working conditions and lives of academics. Scholarship on how to resist the pace of neoliberal teaching, research, and learning would also partner well with this book, including titles such as *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* and *Slow Scholarship: Medieval Research and the Neoliberal University*.

*Dissonant Methods* compellingly demonstrates that when we, as instructors, pay more attention to our *forms* of teaching, we "become more attuned to their disruptive or emancipatory potential" (Jaarsma, p. x). By showcasing work that details how to marshal such potential, this book successfully delivers a vital message: there is power in teaching despite, and indeed against, forces of neoliberalism that can seem indestructible. As a reader, I close the book feeling energetic and ready to "undo" more than just Discipline in the Humanities classroom.

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