

BOOK REVIEW

O'Farrell, C., Meadmore, D., McWilliam, E., & Symes, C. (Eds.). (2000). *Taught Bodies*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Softcover, 224 pages.

The wide-ranging essays collected in this book have their origin in a conference entitled "Pedagogy and the Body" held in Australia in 1997 at the Queensland University of Technology. This volume shares an editor and some of the same contributors with the 1996 collection, *Pedagogy, Technology, and the Body*. Not surprisingly, it presents variations and elaborations of many approaches and themes of this earlier collection. In contrast with McWilliams' meticulous introduction to the earlier text, she opens *Taught Bodies* with a rather daring claim: "The degree of seamlessness in the topics covered in this book is evidence that the body and pedagogy are inextricably intertwined." The essays that follow, however, provide evidence that both support this claim and cast some doubt upon it.

Among the topics and themes that the papers share in common is an interest in the role of the "sexual or at least sensual" (p. 83) nature of the body in learning. Taking the academy (or at least adult education) as their general pedagogical focus, several authors make note of "the well-established belief that corporeal, physical and sexual realms are unwelcome intrusions into [this] otherwise monastic and disembodied space" (p. 48). In "Pedagogy: Incomplete, Unrequited," Bronwen Levy elaborates on this observation by emphasizing the "potentially disruptive or subversive" consequences of the body's physicality in the academy. Looking at both historical and contemporary academic cultures, she observes that whereas the straight, white body of the male academic enacts its own effacement through its very normalcy, the female academic must actively work to erase her corporeality – "otherwise she becomes or is her body" (p. 85). Through their discussions of matters such as pregnancy, menstruation, and harassment, a number of other contributors echo this observation (see, for example, pp. 184-185).

The argument is often made that the body is, of course, never completely excluded from teaching and learning. A number of papers explore how the pedagogic relationships between student, teacher, and the curriculum can be understood as self-consciously embodied

and latently, or even explicitly, erotic. In an essay on teaching English literature, Ray Mission and Wendy Morgan argue for a greater awareness of our embodied responses to reading through a rehabilitation of the concept of the "aesthetic." They advocate attentiveness to our embodied responses of "laughter, tears, groans" as well as an inner awareness of things such as "muscular shifts, a change in breathing," and other nuances "that are all but imperceptible." Taking a different approach, Susie O'Brien considers the foregrounding of the body in pedagogy by looking at the notorious case of Professor Sydney Sparkes Orr in New Zealand during the 1950s. Using a broadly feminist and Foucauldian frame of reference, O'Brien emphasizes the ambiguous complexity of eroticized pedagogical power and of power in general: "there is a growing acceptance that power can be at the same time sexual, structured, gender-based, circulatory, repressive, liberatory *and* pleasurable." Significantly, in pieces such as those by Erica McWilliam and Caroline Hatcher, the body is similarly understood in comparable Foucauldian terms as an object of discipline and control. Looking at new forms of lifelong, corporatized education and training, McWilliam and Hatcher describe how the "disruptive," "eruptive," or "passionate" aspects of the body are actively repressed in these new pedagogical practices.

However, the understanding of the body as the seat of irrational passions reveals one of a number of tensions and incongruities that contradict the claim of thematic "seamlessness" made in the introduction to this book. For example, the paper by Mission and Morgan cited earlier, explicitly repudiates "a false opposition of the natural against the taught, or of body, pleasure and play against the analytical work of the mind" (p. 100). The case is made that to understand the body as the site of disruptive passions subject to discipline and control is to identify and reinforce traditional understandings that separate mind and body. In addition, it obscures the body's mute, concrete materiality. In "The Kama Sutra as curriculum," Peter Cryle pushes the point further by saying that to think of the body as the site of sexuality and of the "indiscipline we call desire" is to force the body back into "a place in the discursive order." Cryle observes that this is not something that can be avoided, but he also emphasizes that it must, at the same time, be itself underscored and interrogated.

While the question of the body's occupation of a position both within and outside of discourse is indeed acknowledged in some of the pieces in *Taught Bodies* (most prominently, those by Cryle, Denise Kirkpatrick and Stephen Thorpe, and Christopher Beckey), it is

conspicuously absent in others. These locate the body unproblematically in the signifying networks of a variety of discourses – and sometimes neglect to bring it into relationship with pedagogy (with which it is supposedly “inextricably intertwined”). A few papers rarely move beyond figurative uses of the term “body” as in “student body,” “body of knowledge,” or “body politic.” They examine cultural representations of the body in fiction or film, and deal with pedagogy only in a sense so broad that it would perhaps be better captured by terms like socialization or enculturation. While such approaches do shed light on the ways that the body becomes encoded in signifying practices of pedagogical and broader culture, they leave the body a cipher in a signifying chain – ultimately diminishing its importance and recognizability in pedagogical practice. A preferable alternative is perhaps outlined in Christopher Becky’s essay “Wicked Bodies.” He calls for a practice that “engenders a different economy of using and representing the body” – one that would teach “a system of corporeality that is different from the regulated everyday body.” It is only through such careful attention to corporeal performance and practice, and its ambivalent and complex relationship with discursive practice that it is possible to imagine a new understanding of the body, or the possibility of its reintegration into pedagogy.

Norm Friesen
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, CANADA