

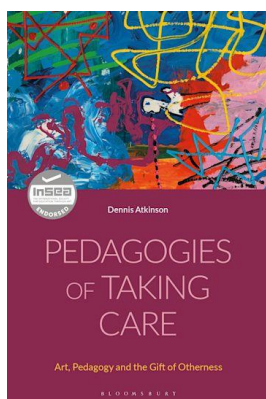
Book review by Esther Sayers

[*Pedagogies of Taking Care*](#) by Dennis Atkinson

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'Can we design schools whose central purpose is not the production of human capital but as centres and communities that promote and advance the arts of living and flourishing with others alongside or beyond the forces of economisation?' (26)

Questions such as this, that ask us to consider what and whom education is for, are the kind that Dennis Atkinson poses in his recent book *Pedagogies of Taking Care: Art, Pedagogy and the Gift of Otherness*. Atkinson's knowledge of art and of the education system has come through practice and underpins the thinking that is explored here. He taught in secondary schools in England from 1971-1988 after which he was appointed lecturer in art and design education at Goldsmiths University of London where he is currently Professor Emeritus. In this book, he gives an account of current educational practices constructing a complex assemblage of neoliberal economic imperatives along with the social and educational concerns of a range of cultural and educational theorists. Through a carefully laid-out entanglement of forces and ideas he draws out scenarios in practice such as the importance of 'speculative leaps' (12) in a pedagogy of taking care, where 'the teacher's leap' involves a certain amount of risk and creative initiative, in contrast to prescribed curricula and controlled methods of teaching. This pedagogy is evaluated by the effects it produces for a 'world-in-the-making' (12), that foregrounds collective values and responsibilities over prescriptive educational projects which drive towards the production of human capital,

economic ambition and competition. This book not only provides important insights into the value of an attentive pedagogy, which sees the potentials of learners in terms of their subjectivities, it also contributes to a conceptual and theoretical framework through which we can explore new insights into the purpose and value of education.

In my work with Masters students at Goldsmiths, University of London, I recently taught a series of sessions on notions of care, attention and concern for ethical pedagogies to attend to the materiality of learning encounters. Atkinson's ideas about the need for 'changing the value of pedagogic currency' (73) have made an important contribution to my teaching. In one example of how something comes to matter in a learning encounter, Atkinson says that the 'initial application of paint generates processes of noticing and reflection upon what emerges on the surface which in turn precipitates further forms of application, a continuous entanglement of forming-noticing-reflecting-reforming' (83). In the art studio the students and I staged what Atkinson, via Stenger's calls 'an idiotic event' (94), 'a provocation for thought and practice, a questioning presence' through a practical task which attended to the 'fixing' or care for a bag of broken objects that I encouraged students to enrich, change and improve. Aspects of this book acted as an important backdrop to this task. In preparing to teach a new course on methods and approaches for practice research the consideration for the status of art practice in systems of scholarly requirements that govern the awarding of doctoral research qualifications, I have found that Atkinson's habit of asking pertinent questions like "What kind of 'thought' is art practice?" (162) are useful.

My reading of this book took place in the year that Ofsted produced a research review on Art & Design Education [1] and The House of Lords Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee conducted an inquiry and published a report in December 2023 entitled 'Requires improvement: urgent change for 11-16 education' [2] which critiques the usefulness of the current system to effectively equip young people with 'the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to progress to the next phase of their education, and to flourish in the future'. The report calls for urgent revision to incorporate more technical, digital and creative areas of study and to reduce the burden of assessment. In *Pedagogies of Taking Care*, Atkinson's insightful questioning of the ways in which pedagogical subjectivities

are produced is articulates the context faced by educators, not just in the arts but in all areas of educational practice and policy.

Atkinson begins with the observation that if some curriculum subjects are prioritised and access to others is reduced, as is highlighted in both the reports mentioned above and in the continuing emphasis on STEM subjects, and if education is driven by prescribed methodologies and subject to rigid inspection regimes then 'other' modes of teaching and learning, that enable individual and collective flourishing, may disappear because they don't fit the prescribed model (2).

The book comprises nine chapters. The first chapter lays the groundwork for the rest by setting out a position statement that advocates for approaches to the purpose of education and to teaching and learning that are grounded in a pedagogy of taking care. The book explores the concept of 'care' in multiple ways throughout, but particular attention is paid to care in relation to Foucault's 'care of the self' (58), 'care of the soul' through the writings of Jan Patočka (60) and the Socratic 'sense of care and examination throughout life' (65). In part one, Atkinson draws in political situations that led to a neoliberal rationalisation of education in the 1980s and 1990s through which education became reconceptualised as the 'production of human capital' (15). In the second part of chapter one, Atkinson argues for an alternative educational project, referred to throughout as 'a pedagogy of "taking care"' (14). He sets up this argument by calling to mind the prescriptive forces that have motivated educational policy in the West in terms of its drive to prepare learners to be economically ambitious and competitive. Through this he sets out to problematise recent educational projects and their effects, in particular the 'serious underfunding of resources for special needs education that many would argue has become a national disgrace' (25).

Atkinson maintains that it is important that education offers the skills and the knowledges required for economic existence, but he also advocates for the importance of education to develop potential in 'aesthetic, affective, ethical, spiritual, physical or political interests and practices' (30). This is in contrast to an education that is stripped down to mainly provide the skills and knowledge required for economic life. As chapter one progresses, much use is made of Félix Guatarri's *Chaosmosis* (1995), through which Atkinson explores alternatives to

highlight what is lost, made invisible, made not to matter in current curricula imperatives. He puts forward a strong argument for pedagogic work that supports the 'this-ness' (haecceity) of modes of learning to open up new modes of practice which will in turn disrupt or challenge the parameters of pedagogic practice. The chapter is used to expand the act of caring into a call for action that values 'the diversity and divergence of human potential, self-affirmation and of collective responsibility and well-being' (49).

Chapter two draws out the problematic notion of an 'educational supercivilisation' (62) as a trope to describe our current education system in which some curriculum subjects are prioritised over other subjects (and their students) 'thus reducing the values and diversity of learning' (62). The argument develops and lays bare the stark facts that we operate in an education system that legitimates some learners (and their subjects) and marginalises others. Atkinson asks:

'Can we conceive of education that is not grounded in economic ambition grounded in the 'addiction to things' (having rather than being), not grounded in the marginalisation of difference of otherness in the sense of following prescribed methods of learning and teaching that presupposes particular pedagogised subjectivities?' (64)

The chapter ends with reference to Isabel Stenger's notion of 'ecology of practice' (69) used in relation to her attempt to respond to differences as 'contrasts' in the creation of a 'diplomatic' scene that constitutes an ecology of practice.

Chapter three continues with a re-evaluation of education and pedagogic work, this time through the lens of Ivan Illich around notions of 'conviviality' as an education that is not based on some learners success that excludes others from achieving. One where particular kinds of knowledge are valued and 'where the production of particular pedagogised subjects are valued over others' too (75). Here 'conviviality' is something autonomous and creative between people enabling interdependence and freedom. The chapter positions Illich's 'Tools for Conviviality' (1973) as an important and tangible means for everyone to develop their potential. Atkinson continues to reference the English educational system as he

problematizes the rhetoric of slogans like 'every child matters, no child left behind' in an education system that 'perpetuates inequality, failure and scarcity' (84). The chapter ends with an incisive return to Stenger's ecologies of practice to draw out important ideas about speculative practices and the 'idiotic event' (93) as a provocation for thought and practice, one that gives us the 'power to make us think or act differently' (94).

Chapter four explores individuation through Simondon's work. This chapter continues to interrogate subjectivity and, as with existential thought, urges us to discard 'the notion of a unified autonomous being' (98). It considers our material encounters with the world - ones that we can't control - how we relate to them and are affected by them. As a side note on (100) Atkinson speaks to the developing discourses around practice based research where he discusses 'research-in-practice'. He extends the chapter's focus on relationality to question research processes in which the whole idea of 'researcher', 'research-object' or 'field of research' as pre-existing entities. Suggesting that to do so constrains the relations and 'milieus' from which research can emerge. The chapter emphasises experience as attainment, a 'composition', that may lead to new individuations - rather than the experience being thought of simply as a product of learning. Through such pedagogic processes, 'learner', 'teacher' and 'knowledge' emerge, they are not pre-existing. Atkinson points to the fact that an overuse of pre-established pedagogical frameworks through which practice is conceived, such as, assessment criteria and competences, are devices that occlude real learning.

In Chapter five we return to some of the concepts introduced earlier such as Stengers' 'idiotic' event and applies those to develop arguments about the insufficiency of pedagogies which 'exclude particular presences and differences' (135).

Chapter six, brings 'poetic materiality' into our understanding of the event that an object, painting or performance might precipitate in terms of invention (144). In part two, Atkinson talks about disturbing established orders to question 'what art can be or become' (163). A very welcome concept is introduced here, that of 'working with ecologies of affect' that are generated through art encounters. I support a model in which assessment criteria might acknowledge such force and our education systems could value sensibilities, making it more

affective and welcoming of learner diversity. In the second part of this chapter, Atkinson loops back to the problem of education for economic prosperity and offers a notion of the possibilities of education that enable 'being and becoming-with' (164) and a revaluation of education that emphasises interdependent relations between subjectivity, social structures and the environment' (164) – what Guattari calls 'an ethico-aesthetic paradigm' (1995). I imagine myself marking art assignments in terms of their value for each creator, as opposed to a set of objective assessment criteria relating to their output. Atkinson invites the reader to speculate about what this could do to pedagogic work in art education. Guattari's 'ecosophy' - a combination of 'ecology' and 'philosophy' - recognises the interdependence of individuals, their communities and their environments. Applied to education systems, Atkinson suggests an 'educational ecosophy' would emphasise such interdependence, rather than placing emphasis on the values of competition, consumption privatisation, deregulation and human capital.' (165). He asks: 'How might we then move towards reinventing educational practices that place emphasis on ecosophic responsibility' (165)?

To advocate for an ecosophic pedagogy of taking care in Chapter seven, Atkinson develops an anthropological framework to enable us to consider rhizomatic becomings in environments of learning. Encounters of 'that which is other' (171) are explored to challenge established understandings and practices. I found this equation of anthropological practice with pedagogy to be very useful as it urges us to explore the ontological question of 'what is there in a learning encounter' (173) by putting our 'epistemological frameworks aside in order to allow that which is 'other' to grasp us' (173). In this way we are able to see potentials rather than focussing solely on categorising pre-determined concepts. Such ecosophic pedagogy urges us to re-conceptualise learning, teaching, assessment and practice. Atkinson pursues an argument that positions the importance in pedagogy of being able to respond effectively to divergent ways of being (ontologies) that constitute students ways of learning. Chapter seven draws to a close with a relevant focus on the impact of Coronavirus and STEM, asking another set of acutely incisive questions, such as: 'Should there be such a major emphasis on STEM subjects at the expense of the arts and humanities?', and 'Should we entertain a radical overhaul of the curriculum and devise new educational and pedagogical practices and structures that aim to enable individual and collective flourishing' (191).

Chapter eight engages with micro- and macro-pedagogies to explore further the local event of art practice and the micropolitical forces and resistances that precipitate changes in macropolitical values and structures. Using Stenger's term 'mesopolitics' (199) to introduce processes that continually renew themselves, presenting pragmatic divergences and relational materialities and affects that involve failures as well as successes.

In the final chapter, the idea of interstices is explored through reference in part to Brian Eno's 'scenius' (219), which contrasts with more traditional notions of 'genius' and describes a situation where extreme creativity is generated out of cultural scenes. Atkinson relates this to the classroom 'as a space of collective practice and invention' (218). The interstices in pedagogic practice emerges in the process of a learning encounter as an interruption, a gap or a challenge - a 'disruption to assimilated modes of practice' (223). The Freeland's Foundation artist-teacher network offers a discursive example of an event in which theory meets practice. To close the text, Atkinson reflects on 'the unfinished practice of pedagogy' where taking care responds to the multifarious ways in which people learn. Here, thought and practice must be decolonised to enable new and relevant forms of practice, of attention, to emerge. The personal epiphanies recalled within the last few pages make sense of all of the preceding pages, for they describe pedagogical adventures in which words such as 'and', 'or' and 'perhaps' offer an open pedagogy that allow 'human and non-human flourishing' (232).

What makes Atkinson's work particularly significant is the way in which it offers a theoretical lens through which we might better understand the profound effects of an over-emphasis in our education system on producing human capital, rather than nurturing human beings. Atkinson's use of theory alongside practice gives a framework for thinking that supports teachers and learners in particular through the decolonisation of thought attended to here by 'trusting the 'perhaps'' (235) as a pedagogical challenge that will 'generate a power to make us think and act in more expansive directions' (234).

Endnotes

[1] Department for Education (2023) Research review series: art and design. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-art-and-design/research-review-series-art-and-design>

[2] The House of Lords (2023) Requires improvement: urgent change for 11-16 education. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5804/ldselect/ldedu1116/17/1703.htm>