

## Dissonant Methods: Undoing Discipline in the Humanities Classroom

Madison W. Moore

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## Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

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### **Dissonant Methods: Undoing Discipline in the Humanities Classroom**

edited by Ada S. Jaarsma and Kit Dobson

University of Alberta Press, 2020, 150 pages

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#### **Reviewed by:**

Madison W. Moore

Trent University

*Dissonant Methods: Undoing Discipline in the Humanities Classroom* is a collection of essays edited by Ada S. Jaarsma, a Professor of Philosophy, and Kit Dobson, a Professor of Literature, both at Mount Royal University. The text examines how postsecondary education should divert from neoliberal-based practices into methods that are more conducive to critical thinking and engagement. The term “learnification” is often used to address neoliberal policies that view instructors as solely a resource of information whose ultimate goal should be to guide students to be self-sufficient learners, rendering the teacher useless (Jaarsma, 2020, Kinashuck, 2020). A neoliberalist approach to education also focuses heavily on memorization and standardization, which does not encourage students to think critically or creatively (Pettinen, 2020). Within the book, dissonant teaching and learning methods are explored to challenge neoliberal pedagogy by envisioning a postsecondary experience that upholds inclusive and holistic ways of learning. Many of the authors lean on the metaphor of the “tomato,” found in the novel *On Beauty* (Smith, 2006), to symbolize the varying teaching forms and methods that can take place in a classroom. As students learn from various instructors, they often must adapt to each unique “tomato” or methodology, and by analyzing different forms of educating, we will come to understand the experience of postsecondary students more clearly (Jaarsma, 2020). The work for this book took place over several years, where the authors read shared texts, participated in a workshop, and completed chapters while staying connected. Although there are many contributing authors, the unique approach to the construction of the book allows unique perspectives to be explored while a cohesive and intertwined

theme emerges.

The book is presented in three sections: “The Event,” “Embodiment,” and “The Political,” each of which distinctively approaches the exploration of dissonant methods. “The Event” highlights the fact that market trends influence institutional norms and the way in which learning occurs in a postsecondary classroom (Kinaschuck, 2020; Shuster, 2020). Teachers make pedagogical choices that shape the way students interact with the material and with each other. Although curriculum and form are repeatable, there are unpredictable moments or events that occur in a classroom space that are a pivotal learning experience for both the students and the teachers (Kinaschuck, 2020). Professors need to understand that a student’s pre-existing values and ideologies will affect how they respond to these moments and that inequalities exist within a classroom space, meaning that events, such as a difficult discussion, will be riskier for some students than their peers (Cawsey, 2020; Kinaschuck, 2020). Cawsey (2020) uses the 2015 Dalhousie Dentistry scandal to show how challenging topics, such as rape culture, can bleed into class discussions and illuminate various peers’ opinions. Within these moments, professors have a responsibility to be present and accountable for assisting the students in navigating dissonance within their learning environment and continuously reviewing their instructional methods to create a safe learning space (Cawsey, 2020; Kinaschuck, 2020).

The second section of the collection, “Embodiment,” challenges the standard method of knowledge regurgitation in postsecondary education and suggests a more holistic approach to learning. While Pettinen (2020) speaks about martial arts and Obrecht (2020) focuses on music pedagogy, both authors bring to light the fact that students are not often challenged to learn through their bodies. Pettinen (2020) argues that if professors only produce a curriculum that requires students to memorize information, then they will never truly learn the material in a way that is conducive to knowledge application in the future. Standard forms of memorizing do not work because absolute truths do not exist since information is constantly changing as human knowledge progresses (Pettinen, 2020). Obrecht (2020) suggests a more “unblocked” approach when creating a syllabus that allows students to understand that a concept can be addressed in various ways. Using a pedagogical method that supports learning as an open-ended process brings rise to more curiosity and vigour towards learning from students (Pettinen, 2020).

Lastly, the third section of the book titled “The Political” emphasizes some risks associated with dissonant methods in postsecondary classrooms while still supporting the goal of implementing techniques that create dissonance. Mitra (2020) discusses the concept of personal frames, which suggests that our backgrounds affect how we interact with material presented in a classroom. Each person’s frame is unique and has limits, meaning they may not be able to relate to particular texts or conversations, and it is important for professors to be aware of this when they are teaching (Mitra, 2020). Jones (2020) focuses on defensive reactions that may occur when differing opinions are expressed on a topic or situation. Although dissonant pedagogy may harm some bodies, Jones (2020) encourages professors to work towards creating a safe space where unnerving discussions can occur

and become a moment of possibility and growth. It is essential to remember that when dissonant moments occur, not all students are situated the same in terms of vulnerability and risk, and professors should actively be aware of these discrepancies in safety (Cawsey, 2020; Jones, 2020; Kinashuck, 2020). This book is an essential read for any academic instructor in a postsecondary classroom. While I believe concrete suggestions for implementing dissonant methods into a pedagogical approach were missing from this book, it may be a natural next step for subsequent publications. However, the essays in this collection successfully challenge its readers to analyze their own teaching styles and engage in conversations around bettering education through discussions that produce dissonance. Pettinen (2020) suggested that teachers should always be learning and changing to adjust their pedagogical methods to create the best learning environment possible. After reading *Dissonant Methods: Undoing Discipline in the Humanities Classroom*, I have learnt valuable information that will make me a better educator.

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