Research & Policy

# Post-Humanism and Literacy Studies

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This column examines the concept of post-humanism and outlines some possibilities and cautions for how it might be integrated in literacy teaching, research, and policy.

So much of contemporary education reform centers on the individual. We use test scores to track students for admission to schools and courses (Ravitch, 2010), deploy learning management technologies to codify changes in an individual's performance (e.g., Nichols, 2012), and even tabulate data to hold teachers accountable for "value-added" measures that capture students' learning (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008). Such mechanisms for quantifying teaching and learning to better classify and evaluate individuals are not a new phenomenon (cf. Kliebard, 2004; Koretz, 2008); however, they take on new meaning in a time when key decision makers are increasingly enchanted with the promise of "Big Data" and its attendant technologies to address our long-standing social problems (Andrejevic, 2013; Morozov, 2013). From federal policies like the Every Student Succeeds Act (The White House, 2015) to a growing body of education research (e.g., Bambrick-Santoyo, 2010; Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006), "data-driven" schooling has emerged as a taken-for-granted ideal. This, perhaps, is no surprise, as researchers and policymakers generally agree that teachers ought to make decisions for practice based on carefully weighed evidence. But without a clear articulation of what counts as "evidence," data-driven education can quickly become a way to locate responsibility in individual students and teachers for the strengths and shortcomings of classrooms.

Of course, these uses of data-driven metrics are not without their critics. Literacy scholars have long documented how such accountability measures are not neutral indicators, but rather they reshape curricula and instruction in their image (e.g., Hillocks, 2002; Zacher-Pandya, 2011) and often assign personal responsibility for systemic inequities (Stevens & Piazza, 2010). Others argue that these data-driven techniques in fact reproduce inequalities related to race, class, and ability and reduce the complexity of student potential to a number (Campano, 2007; Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Dutro & Selland, 2012). Even common sense can poke holes in the internal logic of individualized, data-driven calculation: any teacher knows that factors as simple as the time of day, the temperature in the room, and the availability of specific materials can dramatically alter students' dispositions, performances, and engagement. But variables like these are not—and, indeed, cannot—be easily folded into rubrics that place the locus of success, failure, and growth on individuals alone.

To broaden conceptions of what counts as "data" and to address the limitations of a focus on individuals as the singular, determining factor in teaching and learning, researchers have increasingly looked to theories of *materiality* as a way to account for the complexities of classroom activity (Jones et al., 2016; Taguchi, 2009; Taylor, 2013). Unlike human-centered perspectives, which foreground

individual agency and intention in explaining social outcomes, a material stance is sometimes called *post-humanist* because it begins from the premise that humans never act in isolation, but rather in concert with changing networks of people, objects, histories, and institutions. For example, instead of assuming that a high-stakes assessment is simply a matter of frictionless transfer between an individual student's mind and an answer key, a post-human approach works to identify the layered dimensions that mediate this exchange: the biological (synapses firing in the brain), physical (cramps in the writing hand), environmental (temperature and condition of the testing room), cultural (relation between student identity and the assumed background knowledge in exam questions), institutional (the web of standards, curricula, and instruction that underpins a student's formal learning to date), and so on. From a post-human perspective, all of these dimensions work together in a contingent interplay to produce any literacy event—be it taking a test, reading a book, or completing a class project.

This distribution of activity, agency, and responsibility across networks of actors has found resonance in a growing body of literacy research. While not explicitly invoking post-humanism, Brandt and Clinton (2002) argue for de-centering the human role in literacy events. They discuss the ways that human and non-human "sponsors"—policies, technologies, businesses, families—sanction and support different literacy practices. Similarly, Pahl and Rowsell (2010) develop the concept of "artifactual literacies" to denote how literacy learning in early childhood settings is often animated by interactions with images, collages, and material objects. Leander and Boldt (2013) also emphasize that literacy is "embodied"—meaning that it is situated in physical places, which should prompt language arts educators to be attentive to the ways students move through and interact with their environments.

Beyond individual studies, literacy scholars in critical discourse analysis and critical disability studies can be seen as aligned with a post-human stance: the former, by recognizing discourses as not just reflecting the intentions of an individual mind, but as actors themselves that circulate through material institutions and directly influence what can be thought, said, or done (e.g., Foucault, 1977; Janks, 2009; Rogers, 2011); and the latter, by attending to the ways in which a classroom's built-environment plays a role in providing or denying access to education (e.g., Collins, 2011; Dudley-Marling, 2004).

Likewise, full fields of research have started directly engaging with post-human theories. In early childhood studies, for example, scholars use this perspective to consider how classroom space can support or detract from students' literacy learning (e.g., Olssen, 2009; Vecchi, 2010). And in curriculum studies, theorists have argued for a less anthropocentric approach to pedagogy—for instance, by centering activities on animal rights and ecological justice (e.g., Petitfils, 2014; Snaza & Weaver, 2014). Recent issues of *Language Arts* have also featured researchers and practitioners who draw on post-humanism to explore the relationships between literacy, play, and learning in elementary classroom settings (e.g., Kuby & Rucker, 2015; Thiel, 2015).

Given this turn toward the post-human dimensions of literacy, it can be helpful to take stock of how these theories have emerged and what perspectives and questions they make possible for literacy education. In the sections that follow, we provide a brief overview of how post-humanism has evolved and some ways it can support the work of literacy teachers and researchers. We then articulate some questions and implications for educators who are interested in engaging post-humanism in their research and practice.

## A Post-Human "Turn": Where Did It Come from? What Does It Do?

As with many theories in education research, the growing interest in post-humanism is an extension of a recent move in social theory writ large—one manifested in similar "turns" across a range of disciplines: from feminist theory (Coole & Frost, 2010) and continental philosophy (Bryant, Srnicek, & Harman, 2011) to sociology of science (Law & Hassard, 1999) and ecology (Morton, 2013). For some, this material focus is linked to social and environmental justice—an invitation to consider

the "hybridity" of human and non-human interdependence (e.g., Haraway, 1991; Latour, 1993, 2004). For others, it is more abstract—a return to the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Henri Bergson, who theorized the nature of objects, technologies, and materials (e.g., Grosz, 2004; Harman, 2011). Yet, despite these different lineages, post-human work across these fields shares a common interest in de-centering "the human" as the locus of agency, causality, and knowledge, and instead understanding the ways humans live environmentally, enabled and constrained by changing networks of human and non-human actors.

Such a perspective can be understood as "post-human" in two ways. First, it suggests that humans are not independent, rational agents whose actions are unfettered and transparent, but rather, are always interdependent with the other humans and non-humans around them. Jane Bennett (2010) illustrates this with the image of an individual riding a bicycle on a gravel road: the rider may exert agency in choosing a direction, but that rider is always at the mercy of countless stones (and the bike itself), which may sustain or upset the chosen trajectory. This image mirrors our earlier example of high-stakes testing: while a literacy assessment ostensibly measures student ability, individual performance is not easily separated from the material pressures that shape the act of test taking. Second, this perspective is "post-humanist" because it can also call attention to certain troubling legacies of traditional humanism—for instance, in the way material realities of phenotype and assigned gender have been used to classify who is and is not counted as fully human and thus deserving of rights (Weheliye, 2014; Campano, Ghiso, Rusoja, Player, & Schwab, 2016). In contemporary contexts, this post-human perspective can help reveal how certain uses of data-driven ranking, sorting, and classifying are tied to a humanist ideal that has disproportionately benefited dominant groups.

With this in mind, we can begin to see how post-humanism might inform literacy teaching and research. Rather than being satisfied with explanations offered by isolated data points on improvement charts, post-humanism can provide a framework to think about classrooms environmentally, to see the contingencies of teaching and learning not as confounding variables to be overcome, but as a fundamental condition of our work as educators. Such a perspective can be both humbling and freeing. For teachers and researchers, it allows us to acknowledge the impossibility of reaching some chimeric view-from-nowhere in our observations, representations, and assessments of literacy activities. It lets us admit that our intentions are never fully transparent, even to ourselves; nor are they dis-embedded from the actions of the other humans and non-humans that make up our classrooms. Further, this perspective eschews the medical model of literacy education that seeks to isolate deficits in individuals, and instead fosters a reflexive inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) that strives to imagine how lessons, classes, schools, and districts might be better configured to support all learners. In this way, a post-human perspective joins other critical scholarly work that complicates the tidy narratives that charts, graphs, and measures ostensibly tell about teachers and students (e.g., Edelsky, 2006).

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## Some Cautions

Even with the promising contributions that post-humanism offers, there are important cautions to be considered in thinking with and implementing such a stance in teaching and research. The first involves how we theorize the concept of post-humanism. While it would be comforting to believe that many of the troubling legacies of humanism can be overcome with attention to or celebration of "materiality," such a view risks reproducing the same dichotomy between humans and materials that post-human theories are meant to unsettle. At its best, a post-human stance does not leave humans

behind, but rather attends to the ways human life is imbricated with non-humans, institutions, and histories. For this reason, the "post" in post-humanism is perhaps best understood not as signaling a disconnected successor to humanism, but rather as the patient working-through of humanism's internal contradictions in order to determine what ought to be salvaged, reformed, or abandoned (cf. Lyotard, 1984). In literacy education, this means broadening our perspective on what factors help shape student learning in our classrooms and teasing out their implications for policy and practice.

In one sense, there is already of rich tradition of this kind of work in literacy research. For example, scholars of reader-response theory have long suggested that books themselves exert a type of agency in creating conditions for meaning making or supporting critical orientations toward the world (e.g., Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2012). Likewise, researchers who align drama with language arts learning have demonstrated how material resources like props and costumes can transform classroom environments and the ways students engage with them (e.g., Edmiston, 2007). Post-humanism, then, can build on these traditions to examine how the networks that shape student learning extend beyond books and props and include a host of other dimensions that have rarely, if ever, been accounted for in literacy research and pedagogy.

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A second, related caution concerns the ethics of post-humanism—particularly with regard to its framing of agency and "the human." It is ironic that at the same time social theorists are claiming that humans are just one node in a tangled network of actors, geologists and environmental historians have begun to refer to our epoch as the Anthropocene—the age of the human—to denote the intractable changes we have wrought on the planet's geosphere and atmosphere (Chakrabarty, 2009; Peters, 2015). It is also troubling that when scholars of color are advocating for methods that take seriously the knowledge and humanity of marginalized voices (e.g., Paris & Winn, 2013; Weheliye, 2014), others are calling for a pivot away from—or "post"—humanism. Where the purpose of a materialist perspective is to draw out our interdependence on one another and our environments, incongruities like these illustrate how an uncritical adoption of this stance has the capacity to reproduce the same inequities that post-human theories purport to expose. Indeed, there is precedence for such concerns: as some scholars have noted, it is not accidental that Heidegger, one of our most provocative philosophers of materiality, saw no discontinuity between his academic work and his involvement with the Nazi party (Farias, 1991).

For this reason, it is important that attention to agency as something distributed among humans and non-humans should not distract us from the ways this distribution is uneven. For instance, while the high-stakes testing paradigm affects most students regardless of background, the individualistic, meritocratic ideology that undergirds it privileges certain identities, and thus works to sustain legacies of social stratification. At its best, a post-human orientation does more than help map these inequities as nodes in the larger network of testing; it provides resources and vocabulary for understanding the interdependence of humans and non-humans in maintaining or upending injustices within such networks. In this way, post-humanism can draw us into deeper reflection about the urgent and profound ways that our lives, technologies, and activities exert tremendous pressures on our planet, cities, schools, and students—and can help us envision how these might be better reconfigured for mutual flourishing.

One final caution pertains to implementation. As with any new theory in literacy research and practice, it is important that the contributions of a

post-human stance be seen not as a theoretical panacea, but rather as a resource to think with. In a time when teaching and learning are increasingly reduced to the narrowest forms of "data," a post-human perspective can make legible the layers of complexity that constitute these practices and untangle the ways they often participate in the perpetuation of inequality. For this reason, it would be unfortunate for such a materialist orientation to be written off as another passing fad in obscure social theory: there is a great deal of pragmatic work that such a stance can bring to pedagogy—from challenging conceptions of what counts as "data" to raising questions about the role of the built-environment in supporting literacy learning.

It would be equally regrettable if the efforts to reimagine classrooms through a post-human lens disregard those teaching and research methods that have historically contributed to equitable literacy education. For example, tracing material objects' trajectory around the classroom may provide new ways to see and think about schooling, but it does not, by itself, lead to transformation—much less the more prosaic work of teaching students to learn to read, write, and navigate the world critically. Fortunately, one of post-humanism's strengths is that it does not require us to abandon our existing practices altogether, but rather provides new dimensions that help better account for the complexities of the classroom. In this way, a material orientation invites us not only to contemplate our interdependence on one another and our environment, but also to imagine its concrete implications for literacy teaching, research, and policy.

## Implications

In broadening focus from individuated performance to the material interplay of people, environments, and institutions, a post-human orientation opens new lines of inquiry that allow us to rethink the structure and practice of schools and classrooms. Amid pushes for data-driven education, for example, this orientation can help interrogate what information gets included in conceptions of "data" and what nuances are omitted on grounds that they are not amenable to easy translation into numbers, charts, and graphs. At the level of policy, this not only presents challenges to the ways we think about student assessments, but also our modes of evaluation for educators, who are, like those they teach, too often scored on individual rubrics that fail to account for the constellation of material pressures that can sustain or upset their work. Likewise, a post-human perspective reframes our notions of agency—not as something teachers transfer to students, or that researchers locate through observations of class interactions, but rather as something negotiated environmentally as humans and nonhumans interact to give shape to literacy activities.

A focus on post-humanism can offer educators something more than catchy jargon from a new social theory; it can provide a framework to help imagine how our lessons, classes, and schools might be organized to better support equitable student learning.

Most important, this sort of interdependence has practical implications for literacy pedagogy. Not only does it invite teachers to imagine how the materials and built-environment of the classroom might better sustain student learning, but it can also find a place in the curriculum itself. Teachers, for example, might think about how the introduction of new materials—a prop in readers theater or art supplies in writers workshop—can help to reposition a student previously labelled "struggling" as an engaged intellectual contributor. Likewise, a computer-based activity could include a shared inquiry into how technologies change the ways we interact with one another. In a similar vein, reading a nonfiction story about animals might be linked with lessons that help students see other sentient beings not as resources to be exploited, but as coinhabitants of a fragile planet. In this way, a focus on post-humanism can offer educators something more than catchy jargon from a new social theory; it can provide a framework to help imagine how our lessons, classes, and schools might be organized to

better support equitable student learning. In doing so, it can also help us to see students and teachers not as isolated data points to be assessed and ranked, but as learners who live interdependently with one another and with our environments.

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