



Book review: Syska, A., Buckley, C., Sedghi, G. and Grayson, N. (eds.) (2025) *Transformative practice in higher education: innovative approaches to teaching and learning*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Beyond the pivot: reimagining higher education through pedagogical innovation

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The emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 prompted a sudden sector-wide shift to online teaching, learning, and assessment, initiating a period of rapid adaptation under immense pressure. Yet, out of the crisis, opportunities emerged to reimagine higher education (HE) in a more creative and compassionate way.

Transformative practice in higher education: innovative approaches to teaching and learning brings together 23 reflections on the lived realities and innovative practices of HE practitioners during and immediately following the pandemic. Originating in the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education's* Number 22 (2021) Special Edition 'Compendium of innovative practice: learning development in a time of disruption', it offers a rich collection of frameworks and approaches, adaptable across contexts, which balance immediate responses to an educational emergency with explorations of ongoing and persistent challenges. The result is a forward-looking, collective chronicle of crisis-driven change that offers insights and recommendations for navigating a post-pandemic landscape marked by ongoing uncertainty and disruption.

The volume's central premise is that transformative practice in HE is often catalysed by extraordinary disruption, as the crisis response removes barriers to experimentation and risk-taking, leading to meaningful change. The editors and contributors resist the pressure to return to a pre-pandemic 'business as usual', advocating instead for an ongoing

compassionate, inclusive approach that prioritises wellbeing, collegiality, and human agency.

A notable strength of the collection is its balance between the theoretically focused section introductions and the pragmatic, actionable practices found within its chapters, which are curated into four thematic sections:

1. Curating time and reflective space to transform practice.
2. Building connections to transform practice in higher education.
3. Crossing boundaries: individual and institutional impact in higher education.
4. Homo ex machina: transforming practice to keep sight of our humanity.

Each chapter follows the standardised title format 'What X taught me/us about Y', emphasising reflective practice and sustained relevance. Beyond the section themes, several cross-cutting concepts emerge.

The volume positions itself as a call to resist the externally driven accountability measures of the neoliberal university. Lee Fallin (Chapter 8) critiques the marketisation of HE and the constant need for self-justification, while Paul O'Kane (Chapter 23) provides a forceful critique of standardised approaches, challenging 'New types of teaching and learning that can be counted, measured and controlled' (NTLCMCs). Drawing on Fine Art's disruptive traditions, O'Kane provocatively asks whether the technological 'tail' is now wagging the pedagogical 'dog' (p.215), comparing prescriptive learning design to a 'vending machine' as opposed to the 'farmers' market' (p.212) ethos of genuinely radical and distinctive educational approaches. Throughout the volume, educators and third space professionals are consistently encouraged to develop practices and leadership qualities that are transformative, not transactional.

A compassionate approach to pedagogy underpins the volume, not as a soft 'add-on' but as a deliberate, radical stance. Chad McDonald and Rebecca Parry (Chapter 1) create time and space for diverse student voices in module design, while Lynn Gribble and Janis Wardrop's concept of 'educational capital' (Chapter 9, p.90) offers a framework for addressing structural disparities in educational access and outcomes. Martin Compton's advocacy for radical compassionate pedagogy (Chapter 6) explicitly positions inclusive

practice, rather than individual accommodation, as key to institutional transformation. Compton's chapter rejects the role of 'agents of compliance' (p.56), instead advocating for space and scaffolding for colleagues to reflect and grow. This is reinforced by Carina Buckley and Rebecca Cohen (Chapter 7), who describe how their 'online tea break' evolved into a transformative approach to collaboration. Their discussion of knowledge as residing in 'microcultures' (p.71) — small networks which can create pockets of excellent practice — offers a valuable model for how informal conversations can bridge institutional silos and how simple interventions can foster authentic communication that extends beyond crisis response into sustainable practice.

While compassionate pedagogy focuses on approaches to development, a separate but related theme addresses wellbeing and the psychological dimensions of learning communities. Farrukh Akhtar (Chapter 2) explores how 'focusing' (p.22) can foster emotional regulation and belonging during periods of isolation. Sean Afnán Morrissey (Chapter 5) explicitly connects the 'breakneck' pace of change (p.48) to reduced staff wellbeing, while Lucinda Becker (Chapter 10) investigates how to foster a sense of belonging for students with limited campus interaction opportunities. Chapter 14, 'What floating in pandemic hyperspace taught us about grounding creative academic practice in the here and now', captures the emotional dimensions of pandemic teaching. The chapter's authors use case studies — focusing on a playful PGCert module and the Teaching and Learning Online Network (TALON) — to demonstrate how intentional community-building creates psychological safety in crisis contexts.

One of the most valuable contributions of the book is its recognition that in the suspension of business-as-usual, there emerged opportunities for risk-taking, critical reflection, and pedagogic reinvention. Multiple chapters reflect on how 'survival mode' created space for collaborative problem-solving and experimentation that may not otherwise have happened. The CHAMELEON framework of Laura Davies and Joseph Davies (Chapter 4) offers a flexible and adaptive approach to managing educational change. Its emphasis on negotiation, openness, and continual evolution remains relevant to educators navigating the implications of generative AI (GenAI), job precarity, and shifting student expectations. While GenAI is not a key focus of the collection (understandably, given the timescale of the reflections), the emphasis on critical engagement, reflexivity, and relational practice

offers transferable lessons and an invitation to remain curious, critical, and courageous in the face of new uncertainties.

As with any edited volume, there is some variability in style and depth, but the editorial vision is strong, and the thematic coherence is impressive. The book succeeds in weaving together personal narrative, theoretical insight, and practical advice without losing sight of the sector's broader social and political context. Its call for thoughtful, human-centred approaches feels particularly urgent as educators grapple with the impacts of generative AI, intensifying workloads, and persistent structural inequalities. If there is a limitation, it is perhaps that some of the inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic — including digital inequality — could benefit from deeper exploration, so there is potential here for further research and reflections.

Transformative practice in higher education is an essential resource for educators, third space professionals, and leaders seeking to navigate and shape the post-pandemic university. Its lessons in radical compassion, inclusive pedagogy, and collaborative resilience are urgently needed as the sector faces further change. The volume resonates with Learning Development practice, particularly in its emphasis on compassion, collaboration, critical reflection, and emancipatory pedagogy. We are all challenged to protect and sustain this transformative mindset as we move back into less flexible institutional structures. This is a book that does not simply reflect on crisis, but models how hope and opportunity can emerge from it.

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