



Book review: Eyre, J. (2025) *Learning Development in higher education: crisis, practice, and power in the 21st century university*. Singapore: Springer.

Crisis as opportunity: a Deleuzian exploration into the contours of Learning Development

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Jason Eyre, Senior Lecturer in Learning Development at De Montfort University in Leicester, has certainly met Alicja Syska and Carina Buckley's (2023) call for Learning Developers to write their field of practice into existence. This highly original and philosophically rigorous text is not principally concerned about what Learning Developers do (although it certainly does present such practices in an innovative way), but rather it is about the interweaving factors that create the sociopolitical contexts in which Learning Developers undertake their 'typical' roles (p.1; p.10).

Eyre argues that crises are the norm, rather than exceptional. However, opposed to a nihilistic stance that would deem the contexts in which Learning Developers aim to survive and potentially thrive as unworkable, Eyre deems crises as moments for them to exercise creative judgement (p.2). There is an explicit therapeutic aim to the research: to alchemise potential disillusionment into empowerment (p.2).

There are three points presented in the conclusion that help situate Eyre's contribution. Learning Development is:

1. A response to/expression of crises of expectation in higher education.
2. A continual testing of legitimacy across a range of teaching and learning practices.

3. About developing ongoing ethical responses to guide practice in the face of a complex interplay of competing sociopolitical forces (p.146).

The text successfully weaves the broader context outlined above in which Learning Development operates with the particular through a fictional case study approach. This enables Eyre to effectively explore the following three crises through which Learning Developers may develop greater reflexivity about their roles:

1. Can this be done? (crisis of expectation)
2. Is this permitted? (crisis of legitimacy)
3. Is this the right thing to do? (crisis of conduct)

Each of the above can be followed by self-reflection on what 'ought' to be done (p.36). In taking this approach of weaving the broader context with a particular response, Eyre effectively fulfils the stated aim of deepening Learning Developers' understanding of the openness of what they often do, thereby resisting 'rigid categorical boundaries' that would seek to falsely present a 'Universal Picture' of what a stipulated job role entails (p.11). This reflexivity through crises can be followed with a third tripartite: Eyre's presentation of the dialectic between Learning Developer and Learning Development via what he deems three degrees of freedom in the field. These three degrees correspond with three affective modes:

1. Learner (student).
2. Institution (university).
3. Disciplines (including professions).

Any alteration in the Learning Developer's practices results in a change in their relationship with one or more of the three modes (p.121); herein lies the strand of empowerment running through the text.

Eyre takes a Deleuzian approach, owing to the latter's post-structural thinking of multiplicity over 'purity', and an idiosyncratic reading of key predecessors such as Spinoza, Leibniz, and Nietzsche (p.2). Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) was a French philosopher who evades easy categorisation. This is consistent with evident post-structural themes from his

work: difference over similarity, and plurality over singularity. A response to structuralism (the study of signs), post-structuralism focuses upon the contexts that create, and the readership that sustains and affects signs.

The chosen Deleuzian approach was wholly appropriate for the moves Eyre seeks to make. To effectively combine dense, abstract philosophical ideas with the day-to-day practices of a 'typical' Learning Developer, Eyre employs a novel method. There are diary-style entries of a fictional Learning Developer, Lucy, throughout the text (pp.15–20 for the lengthiest account). Eyre asks the reader for 'cooperative goodwill' in reading these fictional accounts (p.3). They are so engaging – I certainly think there is scope for a fictional Lucy spin-off novel similar to Rondeau's *Who stole quality?* (2024) – that they earn plenty of goodwill and help the reader digest the more abstract philosophical content that follows.

For example, two-thirds through the text, by which time the reader has become well acquainted with Lucy, Eyre presents a fictional diary entry, and then, when philosophically analysing it, describes her as 'conjuring' a Universal Picture from her particular practice (p.96). This exemplifies the Deleuzian line of argument: that illusory fixed identity is being magically formulated from fluid plurality. To extend the metaphor, Eyre is concerned with breaking the magician's code and peering behind the veil to enquire about the processes, drives, and mechanisms that result in what Learning Developers often deem effective/poor 'performance'.

Corroborating the above, Eyre states a few pages later that Learning Developers ought to eschew any Universal Picture (Platonic) ideas about Learning Development in favour of particular cases and 'what shapes and directs them' (p.105). To do this, the text slows down (compared to an article, chapter, or conference paper), steps back, and makes a compelling post-structural analysis about power in Learning Development.

While the text curiously never once explicitly mentions post-structuralism (too loaded?) or the Continental philosophy tradition the author draws almost exclusively from (Nietzsche, Deleuze, Derrida, Butler, DeLanda), these choices were wholly appropriate to its avowed aim; namely, that of alchemising potential disillusionment into empowerment (p.2). For post-structuralism is invariably about power and how it is distributed and manifested in

myriad ways (Nietzsche and Foucault in particular). The Continental tradition is primarily concerned with lived experience, and the complexity of the relationship between the particular and supposed general (as opposed to the Analytic tradition, which aims for dispassionate analysis of problems divorced from the thinker concerned with them). Drawing upon thinkers and approaches from the Continental tradition, the text successfully argues the value of rethinking crises as opportunities, instead of problems that need solving, so that the Learning Developer can return to supposed undisturbed stasis (p.51). Eyre does this in a philosophically rigorous manner; the 2020 PhD origins of the text are evident in its structure, signposting, and clarity of the narrative development.

Eyre could have cited ideas by thinkers outside of the Continental canon, such as philosopher Donald Schön's (1930–1997) *The reflective practitioner* (1983) or psychologist Daniel Kahneman's (1934–2024) *Thinking, fast and slow* (2011). For a text of this density, there was a relatively limited number of works referenced in each chapter. There was a heavy reliance on Deleuze and his reading of key other thinkers cited, such as Nietzsche, without due reference to the primary sources; for example, discussion concerning active and passive nihilism in the latter's *The will to power* (1968). The post-structural deconstructionist Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) also features more heavily in footnotes than the main body, and, as such, somewhat ironically (owing to a theme in his own works) 'haunts' the text. A contemporary thinker and fellow philosopher of education, Ansgar Allen (University of Sheffield), also draws upon many of the same sources as Eyre but reaches markedly different conclusions (*The cynical educator*, 2017); in effect, a response of well-considered cynicism against attempts to empower educators working in the higher education industrial complex. As such, it would have bolstered the texts' claims to engage with and rebut some of Allen's contemporary contributions.

Despite the above observations regarding further sources that could perhaps have been consulted, Eyre's text is a philosophically rigorous, engaging, highly original piece of scholarship that I recommend without hesitation to anyone who works as a Learning Developer, or, indeed, with one. This is a nuanced work that, befitting its PhD origins, builds systematically and neatly, all the while exploring a 'messy' topic; that of the nascent professionalisation of Learning Developers in UK higher education (p.158).

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