From Reflection to Diffraction: What Toto Teaches Us About “Thinking-With” Multispecies Companions in Education

Kay Sidebottom
University of Stirling
kay.sidebottom@stir.ac.uk

Donna Carlyle
Northumbria University
donna.carlyle@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract
Animal companions have long borne witness to the reflections and ruminations of their human counterparts. From owls, rabbits, horses and insects to reindeer, mice, and lizards, animals frequently play the role of confidant and often advisor in popular culture, alongside the more common and ever faithful dogs such as Toto in the Wizard of Oz (Baum, 1900). For educators, animals can be important agents in learning and teaching assemblages, shifting the norms of human-centeredness and species exceptionalism to an understanding of relationality and interdependence. Companion-animals may enter teaching practice spaces, either as deliberately invited “guests” or surprising visitors in a “pedagogy of response-ability” whereby the construction of knowledge becomes an ongoing practice of interacting with the world (Bozalek et al., 2019, p. 97). This paper focuses on how, like Toto, animal companions can alter the course of reflective practice by encouraging diffractive shifts in thinking, different connections with the world, and a (re)connection with, or re-framing of personal and professional values and ethics.

Keywords: Animal Studies, Reflective Practice, Diffraction

Introduction

“An animal looks at us and we are naked before it. Thinking, perhaps, begins there”
(Derrida, 2002, p. 397)

Our current global predicament calls for a way of being that encourages notions of kinship with non-human others, accepts complexity, and reframes our attachment to a shared world. Critical posthumanism can offer a much-needed affective turn towards the kind of social justice that accounts for (and celebrates) difference between humans and their more-than-human counterparts; through a process of de-familiarization from the dominant visions of education, schooling, and learning (Braidotti, 2019). Critical posthumanism requires an acceptance of the limitations of Humanism for taking account of the world and our relationship to it; asking us to examine who and what has been critically left out or forcibly removed from the stories we tell, and the way we enact education. This “cognitive and ethical compass” calls us to consider the relations between ourselves and our non-human companions, not as a process of anthropocentrism which continues to position the human at the top of the species tree, but as a move of humility,
kinship, and care (Braidotti, 2017, p. 7). Thus, the critical posthumanism of Braidotti (2013), Alaimo (2016), Haraway (2008), Wolfe (2010) and others differs from transhumanist and other “post” humanist approaches because of its focus on ethics and accountability. This focus takes Derrida’s invitation (which opened this article) to view ourselves as a non-hierarchical, naked species a step further by inviting us to de-centre the human and become curious about the “other.” This is not just with the familiar “pets” and animals that share our daily lives, but through acknowledging multiple “patterns of relationality” with “[n]atures, cultures, subjects, and objects [that] do not pre-exist their intertwined worldings” (Haraway, 2016, p. 13).

A key move in critical posthumanist thinking is to disrupt nature/culture binaries that privilege textual analysis, overlook the body, and disavow the human as an (animal) species. As Coole and Frost (2010) suggest, “…the more textual approaches associated with the co-called cultural turn are increasingly being deemed inadequate for understanding contemporary society, particularly in light of some of its most urgent challenges regarding environmental, demographic, geopolitical, and economic change” (pp. 2-3). Posthuman pedagogies of wildness, strangeness, and the natural can help to ‘queer’ and trouble such binary, normative framings of teaching and learning. For Carstens (2019), education with an ecological focus becomes a “trickster” pedagogy of the uncanny, in which educators must become cognisant of the agency of non-human others and “things.” They must always be “…on the lookout for unexpected connections, mixing together insights from different disciplines of knowledge production…” (p. 72). By stepping out into moments of “strangeness”, Carstens suggests that educators and their students are de-centered and better able to empathise and “become-with” the world at large. Taylor (in Bozalek, 2019) echoes this call to give up our “anthropocentric egocentricity” by constructing a new ethics which includes more-than-human objects and “things” and to incorporate them in a pedagogy of care whereby constructing knowledge becomes an ongoing practice of interacting with the world. Writing as the “Crex Collective”1 Jickling et al. (2020) emphasise the urgent need to reconnect to the land, echoing Indigenous epistemologies and the age-old practices of nomadic peoples in the UK. Pedagogies of wildness here are not add-ons to a standard curriculum (as seen in current practices of outdoor play or Forest-School hour) but integrated across an interdisciplinary curriculum. For Halberstam and Nyong (2018), wildness is not equivalent to nature, but speaks to the wider embrace of otherness, of the queer, the anti-colonial, the menopausal, the aged, and so on. In short, wildness is; “what hegemonic systems have pushed to the margins” (p. 453). This connection of the natural to the political is an important ethical move in posthuman education which envisions educators not turning away from complex environment issues but “staying with the trouble” and responding to it (Haraway, 2016).

Noticing the way in which we think and become-with our companion-species can be one way of de-centering human-centric thought processes and attuning to our bodily responses to events and experiences. Susan Nordstrom (2020), in a controversial journal article co-authored with her cats Amelie and Coonan titled “Guilty of Loving You: A Multispecies Narrative”, troubles the human-centred nature of knowledge production. We note the controversial nature of this article as it highlighted (in a painful way it seemed, for some readers) the speciesism and human exceptionalism of academic writing). Together Susan and the cats expand the narrative to include the non-human world as community, or as eco-system that intra-acts with us day to day.

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1 Crex is the taxonomical name for the migratory Corncrake bird and the name given to the ship that Jickling and fellow educators sailed on around the Hebridean islands in Scotland.
Susan draws on Haraway (2008) to highlight how our embodied intra-actions with companion-animals trouble normative relations. As Haraway observes, “I am who I become with companion-species, who and which make a mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind. Queer messmates in mortal play indeed” (p. 19).

This “queering” poses a challenge to academia-as-usual. The Nordstroms go on to further discuss the different forms of languaging undertaken in their human-cat relations:

We are hesitant to use the word language because language, in Western philosophical traditions, serves as a separating concept between humans and animals. Humans have language. Animals do not. In the contact zones of multispecies relations, humans and animals “understand that they are in rich and largely unchartered, material-semiotic, flesh-to-flesh, and face-to-face connection with a host of significant others.” Our contact zone created its communication system that was bodily, sensorial, and affective (Nordstrom, Nordstrom & Nordstrom, 2020, p. 1235).

Noticing the ways in which we can and do “language” differently in our human-animal relations feels significant in a time of accelerated environmental crisis and increasing species extinction. Turning to the affective, embodied nature of these communication processes takes us beyond the usual cognitive, reasoning mechanisms generally employed to teach about issues such as climate change and animal welfare. What might we begin to understand, if we view “language” differently, and question whose “language” actually matters?

As two teachers, working in the often pressured and always complex world of higher education, our own interest in posthuman thinking is philosophical but also about the practical implications of reframing our relations in the manner described by Nordstrom and her cats. It is concerned with how to put concepts and ideas into action for social change and educational transformation. Our own experiences with companion-species, both in our real lives and in favourite stories, have inspired us to consider the Nordstroms’ ideas of affective contact zones, and respond to Haraway’s (2008) call to “[make] connections, by trying to respond where curiosity and sometimes unexpected caring lead” (p. 301). We have also taken the ideas of wild, strange, and queer pedagogies into our own work with students and trainee teachers, considering how education, practised through these paradigms alters both applications of teaching and learning, as well as professional self-development. For Kay, this involved undertaking a range of pedagogical experimentations with students who were studying for a teacher-training qualification. Instead of the usual diaries used to reflect on teaching practice, she used diffractive methodologies involving companion-animals (both real and imaginary) to help students to work through their daily dilemmas and classroom issues. These processes revealed the extent to which our thinking is always already imbricated in our relations and daily undertakings with non-humans. Drawing on the Nordstroms’ article, Kay also shared her own experiences of thinking alongside her rabbit, Harriet, and Rudolf, the stray cat she rescued.
In her own educational context, Donna reflected on the life of a classroom dog, Dave, whose presence transformed the affective atmosphere of a Year 6 class (10-11 year olds, based in the UK). Dave and the children co-created art, shared ‘common worlds’ and disrupted power arrangements and relations, through their counter-hegemonic movements and placings within the striated place of a school. The relationality and intimacy was observed by Donna.

His ears and face were regularly stroked rhythmically, much to Dave’s delight! Eye contact was also a noteworthy feature of interactions where Dave and the children mutually gazed at one another for sustained moments during physical contact. This interesting aspect of their close relatedness through Dave allowing them safe permission to touch, clearly showed a mutual sense of connectedness, which is essential not only to the children’s enhancement of sensory and perceptual awareness but also of their shared sense of well-being and flourishing (Carlyle, 2019, p. 205).

Related to this, Donna sketched the rhizomatic connections and entanglements that Dave enacted in his wanderings through the busy classroom:
Becoming alert to and noticing the human-animal intra-actions in our lives and witnessing the impact of these entanglements on our affective responses and professional practice, has led us to consider ways in which other educators may put posthuman ideas to work. This article provides an example of how a familiar childhood animal-companion-Toto, from the Wizard of Oz (Baum, 1900) can reveal much about human/non-human thinking relationships. It then goes on to examine the impact of students’ diffractive experiments with both real and imaginary companion-species on their day-to-day teacherly lives.

Thinking-With Toto

Children’s tales or stories often contain moral or ethical messages which are often communicated via the actions of non-humans. By diffracting posthuman ideas of relationality and intra-action through the familiar childhood motif of Toto, our aim is to open up new perspectives for understanding how professionals reflect with and learn from the companion-animals in their lives. Reading critical posthuman ideas through and alongside a familiar children’s tale like the Wizard of Oz (Baum, 1900) also offers entry points for those new to what is often termed inaccessible ‘high theory’. Posthumanism is frequently described as inaccessible or overly complex, and yet it offers potential for educators to explore the liberatory and transformative elements of their teaching practice. We begin with Haraway’s (1992) notion of diffraction and how it is expressed in the Wizard of Oz.
For Haraway (1992), diffraction “does not map where differences appear, but rather where the effects of difference appear” (p. 300). A diffractive approach does not, therefore, set ideas or texts against another, but rather looks to read these ideas through one another. Doing so produces patterns from which new ideas might emerge (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2016). In the same way that a pebble when thrown into water with a second pebble will cause the waves to intersect, so too suggests Barad that ideas can intersect when read through one another, creating multiple differences which are ever emerging. Whereas critical and reflexive readings of texts are often based around subject/object binaries, a diffractive methodology blurs the lines by focusing on the affect arising from the conjunction of different media; in this case, a children’s story and critical posthuman theory.

To diffract our thinking about reflective practice through a posthuman lens, we therefore employ as our animal companion for this paper, Toto the dog from the book “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz” by L. Frank Baum (1900) and the later Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film, The Wizard of Oz (1939). Toto is a small Cairn Terrier who accompanies Dorothy on her journey to a magical land. There he acts as her companion, comforter, and confidant. Engaging with Toto, a familiar, but relatively insignificant character in a story of fantastical, magical and terrifying figures, requires us to take a “minor turn” (that is, a “becoming-with” with the everyday, mundane animals around us) and pay attention to the more subtle ways in which humans and companion-animals interact. Whilst Toto’s role appears at times to be incidental, the dog plays a key part in several significant moments throughout the Oz series of stories.

Figure 3. Dorothy becoming-with Toto
Toto is a driving force, taking himself and Dorothy from striated spaces (the constraining, black and white binaries of Kansas) to the smooth (multicolour and unboundaried spaces of the world of Oz) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). It is in this smooth space that human-animal hybrid relationships are formed and adult boundaries dissolved. It is Toto’s running away that sparks Dorothy’s initial journey, and it is also Toto who inadvertently reveals the Wizard’s fabricated persona at the end of the story. In a world of fantastical characters and super-human activity, it is, in fact, the mundane actions of a small Terrier that prompt key turning points; in this way, he is perhaps more of a “dog ex machina” than an incidental character.

Toto demonstrates how animals often provide simple and straightforward solutions to human issues which are complicated and over-coded by social mores. In the pivotal scene where the wizard’s true identity is revealed, Toto simply pulls back the curtain to show that the figure on the screen is actually a small, old man.

Weil (2012) suggests that it is by becoming attune to the actions of animals that we can overcome the limitations of our rational condition. Toto’s revelation might be understood as a disavowal of the technologically-mediated, disconnected figure of Oz as a rational (post) human, thus returning the focus of the story to the embodied and grounded reality of the human.

Figure 4. Toto Reveals the Wizard
condition. In a real way, Toto insists “...on the intimate entanglement of the human in the material and animal world” (Weil, 2012, p. 174).

In one of Baum’s sequels to the *Wizard of Oz*, *Tik-Tok of Oz* (1914), readers discover that Toto is able to talk in human language when he is in Oz. However, in the passive acceptance style of Herman Melville’s (1853) character “Bartleby, the Scrivener”, Toto “prefers not to.” The dog’s withholding of (human) language is only revealed in the eighth book of the series, when Dorothy discovers that all animals can speak in Oz:

“Toto! Toto!” cried Dorothy, and the dog lifted his head and looked at her with his large, brown eyes. “Toto—do you know who I am?”

“Woof!” said Toto, and that meant “yes.”

“Not just one word, Toto, to prove you’re as good as any other animal in Oz?”

“Woof!”

“Just one word, Toto — and then you may run away.”

He looked at her steadily a moment.

“All right. Here I go!” he said, and darted away as swift as an arrow (Baum, 1914, p. 268).

After this exchange, Toto rarely speaks again. The idea of refusing (human) language and the irrelevance of it for human-animal communication provides Toto with an agency rarely seen in the usual anthropomorphic world of children’s fiction. Despite the dog’s ability to communicate on human terms, his relationship with Dorothy and the other inhabitants of Oz is unchanged and the characters continue to communicate effectively in otherwise-embodied ways.

Toto’s persistence and delight in simple pleasures also reminds us of the Spinozan idea of “connatus”; the desire to endure and persist in our own being (Lord, 2010). Toto’s relationship with Dorothy is one of “becoming-with” or “two-in-one” (Michalko, 1999). His persistence is not an individual persistence but is bound together with Dorothy’s. As the narrator says, “Toto did not really care whether he was in Kansas or the Land of Oz so long as Dorothy was with him; but he knew the little girl was unhappy, and that made him unhappy too” (Baum, 1900, n.p.). However, Toto’s agency produces a shift away from the often-anthropomorphic depiction of animal companions; he is not simply seen as an extension of Dorothy. Instead, their relationship is symbiotic. Their journeys are made together, and learning becomes a two-way process.

Toto’s subtle but significant moves help Dorothy to learn important ethical lessons, as well as reinforcing the role of serendipity and chance in the course of our lives. While the idea of animals as educators is rarely acknowledged, Toto is a teacher. Lupinacci (2019) agrees, saying “We are not the only species with teachers” (p. 115). Paying attention with humility to and learning from the actions of pets—their loyalty, trust, and their always being attuned to the physicality of their bodies and the bodies of others—can thus help us to “…confront human-supremacist illusions of superiority and autonomy” and open up new modes of understanding our places and roles within educational systems (Strom & Lupinacci, 2019, p. 115).
From Reflection to Diffraction

Thinking-with stories, such as the *Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900) is one way in which educators can diffract ideas and decentre humanistic, rational framings of their teacherly lives. In this section I (Kay) describe how I turn to my own practice and the way in which, in conjunction with my students, I shifted understandings of reflective practice to “thinking-with” students’ own animal companions. For a time, I taught a Postgraduate Certificate in Education program, a pre-service teacher adult training qualification in the UK. It is designed as a post-compulsory, community education program to assess students against a set of national teaching standards embedded into the curriculum. To receive their qualification, the trainee teachers had to show evidence of meeting 20 standards; the first two concern Reflective Practice and Values and Ethics below:

1. Reflect on what works best in your teaching and learning to meet the diverse needs of learners.

2. Evaluate and challenge your practice, values and beliefs (Education and Training Foundation, 2014).

The trainees gained practical pedagogical experience primarily from mentors and colleagues in their placement schools and further education colleges. Yet, these educational supports were almost exclusively informed by educational paradigms that, as Freire (1970) observed, promote and value information banking and transmission and are enforced via Academy trusts. To challenge this entrenched way of thinking about education, my students and I spent our sessions reflecting on students’ experiences and investigating ways to reconnect with different educational values and ethics. We considered how knowledge and insight about teaching practice, experiences and ethical dilemmas is also gleaned (but not necessarily articulated) through intra-actions with non-human companions such as pets or diffracted through the stories we watch or read. Together we began to put to work transdisciplinary development practices involving art, dialogue and engagement with posthuman philosophies in the hope of gaining new insights and producing agency.

Most professional award programmes for teacher training in the UK require trainees to maintain a reflective journal in which they record their experiences of becoming teachers and note key learning points. This practice is based on the work of Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988) and usually employs standard analytical approaches such as reflective cycles. Although the mundane nature of daily lives such as writing essays while cooking dinner for the children, reading journal articles on a school run, and emailing academic advisors on the bus) naturally formed an integral part of students’ learning assemblages, this entangled, complex, and multi-faceted environment was rarely acknowledged as containing moments of learning, all be them fragmentary and snatched. For many of the students I taught, animal companions (pets) were vitally important for their learning journeys; pets often infused their learning spaces. They sat alongside them during their studies, acted as walking companions, and had an impact on their thinking time, influencing, or at times derailing it.

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2 Schools formerly controlled by local government, but encouraged to convert to academies in order to become operationally independent.
Considering this reality, multi-species worlding in education must be a consideration both incidental and intentional. Schools, as other environments are naturally places of human and non-human intra-action; they have transcorporeal “leaky boundaries” as Stacy Alaimo (2016) describes them. Despite the nature/culture split which attempts to separate education from the natural world, it doesn’t take much to think of all the various organisms that somehow interrupt the school day, from the pigeon on the playground, to the birdsong heard through the open window, to the bee caught in the window blind, to the rat spotted by the caretaker, to the fox sniffing out food from the bins after hours. Bringing these entanglements to our awareness, led us to further consider the role that non-humans play in our reflective processes.

Snaza’s (2013) concept of “bewildering education” emphasises the unknown aspects of affective pedagogy (p. 39). As he suggests, you can never truly know what a student will bring into the classroom with them and how they will both affect and be affected by others, both human and non. A state of bewilderment requires the teacher to be sensitive to relations between humans and non-human others and attune themselves to how affect circulates. Taylor (2019) also notes the need to notice “…thick moments; condensed instances in which capacities, affective flows, sensibilities and relational response-ability are enfolded in an entangled connectivity…” (Bozalek, 2019, p. 94). These “thick moments” are seen as pedagogical events, or lines of flight which deviate from the linear paths of lesson plans, offering escape paths and opportunities which, when taken, can change the course of educational futures.

For a long time, students on the teacher-training program had been aware that their reflections on their process of “becoming-teacher” was not limited to an analysis of cognitive responses or an analysis of individual experience. Restricted by assessment frameworks that limited reflection to linear or cyclical analyses, they had grown frustrated, although they could not always articulate why the process felt arduous and unproductive. To examine the ideas of non-human/human relations pedagogy, I introduced notions of “bewildering education”, and how one might diffractively read teaching practice through familiar stories such as The Wizard of Oz (1900), Alice in Wonderland (1865) and The Magic Faraway Tree (1943), and with Donna Haraway’s (2008) idea of anima als as provocateurs (Sidebottom, 2019). Through a process of in-class activities and online discussions students were encouraged to share pictures and stories of their non-human or imaginary companions and to consider their role in their lives and learning journeys. To help students reframe their learning “communities” in this way, I shared the story of the Nordstrom cats, and my own rabbit, Harriet, who had become an unanticipated writing companion when her outdoor hutch was overtaken by a nest of tree bumblebees (Sidebottom, 2019).
Students shared their stories of walking with animal companions, created their own stories of teaching and learning based on fairy tales or familiar childhood tropes, or created digital and physical artefacts which expressed their diffractive thinking (about their teaching practice) in different ways. These methodologies brought newness and a range of perspectives that recognised our co-dependent nature as entangled participants in a constant process of growth and development. As a result of this greater awareness, trainee teachers became more sensitive to the position of their own students and the many different ways in which intra-actions of human and non-human others affect the processes of teaching and learning. The walking and wandering with non-human companions, whether these were known companion-animals, or incidental meetings in an outdoors environment, focused their thinking about reflection as a happening or event. It was also seen, not as an act of individual cognition, but as an entanglement necessarily emerging from the process of being non-humans-in-relation. For some trainees, animals as comforting and familiar figures helped to ease anxiety about teaching experiences and—like Toto—provided a sense of objectivity and perspective. For others, like Brinkman (2011), who refers to walking-interviews in a similar way says, teaching practice can be seen as “…an event in which spoken, material, and affective expressions by human and non-human agents gather in a process of ‘doing’ something together” (p. 63). This process helped students to see themselves as being always in relation in their reflective practices instead of focusing their thinking on individual failings or deficits.
Conclusion

Like Dorothy, at the end of our line of flight away from reflection-as-usual we must return to the everyday realities of life in the (black and white) binaries of the UK education system. Thinking-with companion-species, however, allows for nomadic detachment from the usual linear paths of professional development (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Such flight-lines, or fugitive escape routes, are always present to one degree or another, in physical and virtual learning spaces. Noticing and elucidating these can be a form of resistance or a deterritorialization which disrupts fixed elements of a system, causing it to mutate in some way, even if there will be an eventual re-capture by hegemonic educational processes (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). When trainee teachers began to heighten their attention via thinking-with animal companions, they gained further insight into the various non-human components that comprise their teaching assemblages and the different aspects of power (potestas or potentia) that were either restricting or enhancing their ability to act (Braidotti, 2019).

We suggest that Harney and Moten’s (2018) idea of undercommons encapsulates our idea above of fleeing/fugitivity and learning within informal and unrecognised spaces of learning. We felt that key to rethinking ethical practice was to think of ourselves as beings thinking together with our animal companions, of professional development happening in spaces other than classrooms, and of being nomadic in our detachment from institutions. As Moten (2018) states, “Fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument” (in Wallace, 2018, para. 6). To return to Toto, our real and imagined animal companions influence our thoughts and feelings; they re-centre them and we notice their role in our musings and wonderings that can help us to gain new insights as we pay attention to embodied responses which we may have previously overlooked. The processes of “noticing” and elucidating “other-than-human” affects within classroom teaching can offer new insights which may allow teachers of all kinds to take affirmative action for educational change.

Barad (2007) proposes that all things, human and non-human, are in a constant state of exchange, and that these exchanges are a result of things working inseparably. These exchanges, or ‘intra-actions’ entangle humans and their non-human companions, disrupting the usual human-centred activities of working and reflecting. We continue to encourage students to explore the impact of these entanglements with animals to move beyond humanistic storytelling. In this way we can create new stories that take account of the affective nature of the animal-human relationship and the multi-dimensional aspects of our learning journeys.
References


