Special Issue of Journal Educational Philosophy and Theory

Thinking with Spinoza about Education

Overview

This special issue will take up recent reworkings of Spinoza’s (1632-1677) *Ethics* to address the turn to materialism and the non-human in research on teaching and learning. Spinoza has recently come into focus in the social sciences through the insightful reworking of his ideas by scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Etienne Balibar, Antonio Negri and feminist scholars such as Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Claire Colebrook and Catherine Malabou. These scholars plug into Spinoza’s ideas in order to propose a *more than human* ethics, and they thereby set the stage for new directions in the philosophy of teaching and learning.

Scholarly significance

This special issue will be pivotal in establishing an open discussion about the ethics of various new realisms and materialisms within education research (Cole, 2012; Dolphijn & Van de Tuin, 2012; Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2006; Sorensen, 2011). Each paper will discuss how contemporary interpretations of Spinoza’s *Ethics* can inform such a project. Spinoza’s (1632-1677) *Ethics* offers a relational and inclusive ontology in which the more than human collective is recognized and theorized. Spinoza offers an ethics well-suited to the current shift in the social sciences and humanities, as scholars turn to the material force of bodies, and the *élan vital* of matter more generally, be it the plasticity of brains, the molecular flow of affect, or the swarm behavior of ‘live’ data streams (Barad, 2011; Latour, 2005). Chun (2015) characterizes this cultural shift as a deeply dangerous turn to the digital, while Thacker (2004) sees this as an affirmation of biomedia and recombinant subjectivity. This paradigm shift troubles conventional theories of learning, moving beyond notions of “distributed learning” of the last century. The question as to what constitutes an *ethics* adequate to the new paradigm shift remains underexplored and demands attention. This special issue will address that demand. Based on the wide-spread burgeoning interest in Spinoza within education research, the popularity of the interdisciplinary online Spinoza Research Network ([https://spinozaresearchnetwork.wordpress.com/](https://spinozaresearchnetwork.wordpress.com/)), the numerous Spinoza-reading groups that have sprouted everywhere, and the take-up of Spinoza in the biological sciences and in other far-flung departments, we are confident that this special issue will make important theoretical contributions to the study of education.

Guiding questions for authors

Papers are invited that cover a range of relevant concerns, responding to shifts in education research as it takes up new technics, including but not limited to the proliferation of new forms of data saturation, global reform movements, new forms
of corporate and managerial governance, pharmaceutical and neurological interventions, and the use of smart software and machine learning. The thread amongst the manuscripts will be the ideas of Spinoza that are put to work on these various problems.

Possible questions to consider include: How can Spinoza’s Ethics support a robust ethical framework for contemporary studies of education? How might a contemporary reworking of Spinoza’s concepts help us study student agency as that which is distributed across material-affective assemblages? How might Spinoza’s notion of power and conatus be used to make sense of power relations in schools? In what ways might Spinoza’s “absolute infinity” be suitable to studies of political ecology and the datafication of education? How does Deleuze’s emphasis on Spinoza’s concept of expressionism help us study learning? How can Spinoza’s adherence to the concept of necessity help us theorize the contingency of teaching?

In addition, authors are encouraged to show how Spinoza’s work speaks to contemporary shifts in material culture of education through addressing such questions as: How is the very notion of life and learning transposed in this era of live data? How is freedom to be conceived (and lived) in contemporary computational school environments? How might we take up the chemical nature of life in our research, as a form of resistance to the dominant paradigm of the pharmaceutical cure? How can education research attend to the bio-politics or zoe-politics of the more than human?

**Conceptual Framework**

Baruch Spinoza’s (1632-1677) monist ontology, in which all matter is agentic in varying degrees, was developed as an alternative to Cartesian dualist ontology. Spinoza was ostracized for his radical ideas, although his work subsequently influenced many thinkers, including ecologists, sociologists, process philosophers, activity theorists, and political activists. Spinoza’s ethics is highly relevant to contemporary studies of teaching and learning, because of his explicit attempt to show how ontology and ethics are imbricated. Gilles Deleuze argues that Spinoza offers an ethics adequate to contemporary life, and characterizes him as a materialist, an immoralist, and an atheist. Rather than celebrating human will and transcendent ideas, Spinoza the materialist directs our attention to the body and the movement of thought, emphasizing how all matter has the power to affect and be affected in varying degrees; Rather than ascribing to a morality of transcendent values, Spinoza the immoralist proposes an ethics of encountering without judgment, affirms joy and devalues moral law; and as an atheist (or perhaps panentheist), Spinoza offers a rigorous scientific approach and resists the all-too-easy turn to mystification (Deleuze, 1988, 1992). Other scholars have developed this interpretation, applying Spinoza’s theories of affect and power to cultural studies, and demonstrating how Spinoza’s ethics addresses particular political challenges that we face today (Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2012).

**Structure**
Manuscripts should be between 6000-7000 words. Please send 500 word abstracts to Lars Bang (lbj@learning.aau.dk), Elizabeth de Freitas (defreitas@adelphi.edu) and Sam Sellar (sam.sellar@uq.edu.au).

Proposed Timeline to Publication

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References:


Spinoza, B.