

More-than Critical Friendship

A Posthuman Analysis of Subjectivity and Practices in Neoliberal Work Spaces

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As a self-study assemblage (Abrams, et al., 2014; Strom, et al., 2016; Strom, et al., 2018), over the last decade we—four educators from different geographic and professional contexts—have engaged in an ongoing process of collective self-study that has put complex, non-linear theories to work to elucidate the hybridity of our roles in relationship with systems, structures, and each other, and to examine what those relationships have produced in terms of our knowledge, pedagogies, and practices. For example, our most recent collaboration drew on posthumanisms (Braidotti, 2013; Barad, 2007) to analyze the affordances and constraints of digital technology as an agential element in our self-study collective (Strom et al., 2018). Currently, we each find ourselves in shifting conditions: Tammy is facing a reorganization in her college at a large public research university in rural New England; Linda is negotiating her new role in a part-time position as a teacher/leader educator at a STEM-focused foundation; Charity is transitioning to her new role as a faculty member and Associate Dean at a small Catholic university; and Katie, a faculty member at a teaching university on the west coast, is relearning how to be a teacher-researcher after developing a severe anxiety and panic disorder. These changes have required us to (re)negotiate our professional identities and practices, leading us to pose two questions: a) How do we navigate neoliberal workspaces to produce particular educator-subjectivities and practices? b) How is this process shaped by our nearly decade-long critical friendship? To facilitate this inquiry, we combined self-study methodology with cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) analytic methods.

Theoretical Perspectives

The main perspective that drives our work is posthumanism, a critical, complex socio-material philosophy that critiques rational humanist ways of knowing, or “commonsense,” dominant ways of thinking/being (Braidotti, 2019). Rational humanism sees the world as linear, dualistic, essentialist, universal, and neutral. The central referent for reality is the (White/Eurocentric, cis/het, able-bodied, Christian) “man of reason” (Braidotti, 2013; Lloyd, 1982). Although rational humanist thinking comes from a particular time and place— Enlightenment Europe—over time, it has been imposed as the “correct” type of thinking/worldview, a universal and transcendent onto-epistemology. Thus, those with non-normative onto-epistemologies—women, indigenous peoples, people of color, uniquely-abled persons, and so on—are judged as inferior and even less-than-human, the latter of which has been used to justify all manner of atrocities (Said, 2004). A shift away from this thinking entails an onto-epistemology of multiplicity, mobility, relationality, and difference (Braidotti, 2013, 2019; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Strom et al., 2018), which shifts the central referent of existence from the (hu)man of reason to the more-than-human assemblage, or mixtures of connected human, discursive and material elements. These assemblages work together to produce reality, as a series of *becomings* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), or transformations-in-action produced by relational intra-action- that is,

these multiplicities create new conditions and events, always in relation to the other elements of the assemblage.

For us, posthumanism is a form of theoretical resistance that serves as a *line of flight*, or a break from the status quo (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In our self-study work, the concepts of posthumanism help us generate ideas and plans of action that allow us to subvert the soul-crushing neoliberal norms that tend to govern modern educational workspaces (i.e., create lines of flight). In a neoliberal system, educational processes are subject to market logic, which emphasizes hyper-individualism, entrepreneurialism, competition, and productivity (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Davies et al., 2017). Such a system is hierarchical, managerial, reductive, transactional, and focused on efficiency and cost-effectiveness rather than creating the most powerful teaching/learning/research (Davies, 2019). The onto-epistemological shifts of posthumanism provide us with tools to analyze our practices and our subjectivation processes in relational, complex, multiplistic, difference-rich terms, and help us understand how we are connected to multiple power flows and affects that reproduce neoliberal norms and selves, disrupt them, and/or create alternatives to them. A posthuman orientation also helps us trace the temporality of shaping forces within and among activity systems that create particular objects, or goals, at specific points in time. These moments are influenced by historicity and serve as seeds for future transformation of objects.

We also employ CHAT as an intermediate theory/methodology. CHAT examines human development/learning by accounting for the interactions of multiple activity system elements: material/conceptual tools, subjects, objects, and socio-historical aspects including community, rules, and division of labor (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Engeström, 1999). CHAT helps analyze complex activity and transformations within a social community, as well as histories of that transformation, to identify the sources of movement and change (Sannino & Engeström, 2018). While we acknowledge its limitations, we view CHAT from a posthuman perspective that considers the entanglement of the elements within multiple, interacting activity systems and the agency of each element in the transformation of objects.

Literature Review

In this section, we review literature related to collaborative self-study, critical friendship, and CHAT. First, we found that researchers have defined collaborative self-study in different ways. Some define it simply as a collective inquiry into an issue (e.g., Davey & Ham, 2009; LaBoskey, 2004; Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011). Lunenberg and Samaras (2011) describe collaborative self-study as a project in which participants engage in dialogic inquiry, engaging with others' contributions to produce both individual and community learning. Characteristics of collaborative self-study include "1) working to create an intellectually safe and supportive community; 2) being cognizant of participants' personal boundaries and what issues can/should be shared in a self-study forum, and 3) inviting and involving guests to share their experiences in self-study" (p. 847). Others argue that self-study is always already collaborative, such as Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), who note that self-study focuses "on the space between self and the practice engaged in... between self in relation to practice and the others who share the practice setting" (p. 15).

We also examined critical friendship in the context of collaborative self-study. Recent studies have invited critical friends to examine mutual pedagogical concerns in the same context (King, et al., 2019), increase self-study rigor by adding an "external critical friend" (O'Dwyer et al., 2019), and improve teaching practice through cross-disciplinary peer coaching (Hohensee & Lewis, 2019).

Similarly, in our self-study work, critical friends provide different perspectives of our practice, helping us to step outside ourselves (Loughran & Brubaker, 2015; Loughran & Northfield, 1998), understand the context and conditions of our work (Schuck & Russell, 2005), and ensure the trustworthiness of analyses (Schuck & Russell, 2005; LaBoskey, 2004). Notably, long-term self-study collaborations must balance between support and challenge to cultivate trust, incubate practice innovations, and nurture teacher educators in their becoming (Fletcher et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2014).

Finally, we examined literature putting CHAT to work in collaborative self-study, learning that, while many teacher education researchers have utilized this framework (e.g. Somekh et al., 2015; Hancock & Miller, 2018), it has rarely been employed in conjunction with self-study. Our comprehensive search surfaced only three studies with this hybrid methodology. Snow and Martin (2014) used concepts from CHAT in their collaborative self-study to understand the interplay between their teacher education practices and roles as course instructors, liaisons to partner schools, and field supervisors in various contexts. The teachers recognized that their roles and practices are developed from within and across multiple cultural, social, and historical activity systems. Similarly, Engeström's (2001) theory of expansive learning and Sannino's (2008) notion of transitional actions framed the second collaborative self-study by Margolin and Tabak (2011). Here, researchers examined their email correspondences to identify interpersonal conflicts and structural contradictions that developed between them and within their department during a period of change, noting that the dialectical relationship between their own personal transformations and changes in their department were facilitated by transitional actions that bridged the gap between customary and new ways of working. Finally, in Giles (2018), CHAT was useful as a self-study analytic tool in which the researcher, an ESL teacher, applied three elements of CHAT to examine her collaboration with a subject area co-teacher, surfacing contradictions that impeded their ability to collaborate and grow.

Methodology

We drew from self-study methodology (Loughran, 2005; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2009; Russell, 2004) as a collaborative process (Strom, et al., 2018; Placier et al., 2005), grounding our work in LaBoskey's (2004) criteria for quality self-study in Craig's (2009) criteria for self-study trustworthiness. Collaborative self-study structures occasions for colleagues to validate, clarify, and disrupt interpretations of practice (Bullock & Christou, 2009).

CHAT combined with self-study offers the potential to understand how practice develops within activity systems, may be sustained or disrupted by participants (both human and other) and can be fractured by cultural tensions. When used as a heuristic for analyzing data, CHAT may uncover generative opportunities for change that emerge from "disruptions and contradictions" (Engeström, 1993, pp. 40-41) in activity systems. Further, viewing CHAT through a posthuman lens allows us to analyze the interaction among all the human and non-human elements within the activity systems, thus moving beyond just our human "selves" as mediating factors. We analyzed two activity systems—our individual systems and our collaborative self-study system.

We studied our practice by collecting individual data, including online journals, documents, and practice artifacts, related to a specific problem of practice. We met monthly, online, for a total of six meetings, during which we collaboratively analyzed one journal entry each, using a CHAT-informed discussion protocol to guide our dialogic "coming-to-know process" (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2017, p. 12). During each digitally-recorded discussion, a designated recorder captured non-verbatim notes,

and later we each documented our learning in a follow-up reflection. Between meetings, additional data were generated in email and text message exchanges.

We first analyzed all sources of data (recorded conversations, meeting notes, reflections, and text and email messages) by identifying each interactive element of the CHAT system (norms, object, etc). The first round of analysis was useful for generating findings related to our individual practices and subjectivities. However, it also illuminated critical friendship as an emergent theme, which prompted us to survey self-study literature to identify aspects of critical friendship which we used to code our data in the second round of analysis. We noticed certain points in the data when our critical friendship appeared to transform into something else, into a “*more-than-critical-friendship*.” Subsequently, we coded for instances of transformation from critical friendship as it has been described in self-study literature to *more-than-critical* friendship, which we take up below.

Findings

Originally, we intended to share our findings and discuss the change in our subjectivities and practices as well as the role of CHAT analysis in discovering those changes. Instead, we offer a brief summary of those changes below to dedicate space to the emergent finding related to critical friendship. We follow these with illustrative examples of what we have named our “*more-than*” moments of critical friendship resulting from the merging of our individual and collective activity systems.

Subjectivity & Practice Becomings

Charity. Using CHAT and post-human concepts, Charity embraced two approaches as needed in her new administrative role. First, Charity became more aware of and explicit about using her influence in situations when she had the power to positively impact outcomes (e.g., with colleagues, during the accreditation processes, and to initiate continuous improvement initiatives). Second, Charity began to recognize, from a critical perspective, when she could not control outcomes and needed to relinquish her agency to act.

Tammy. By viewing CHAT through a post-human lens, and in collaboration with Katie, Charity, and Linda, Tammy saw subjectivity as a decentered “self” within the self-study. She identified how agential cuts made by the discursive, human, and non-human elements within multiple activity systems produced her decision not to take on an administrative role.

Katie. With Tammy, Charity, and Linda, Katie worked to understand her emerging subjectivity as an academic with extreme panic/anxiety. They negotiated disclosure to students about her disorder and thought through how to use her experiences pedagogically to demonstrate critical perspectives/concepts (e.g., medical/social model of disability). She recognized these practices as a pedagogy of vulnerability, following hooks (1994), and an enactment of feminist posthuman ethics of care.

Linda. As a remote teacher educator dependent on technology in her practice, Linda found that rules regulating human interactions, including social and professional norms, were being produced differently according to degrees of her physical proximity to her colleagues and the teachers she mentors. Engagement with Tammy, Charity, and Katie, her remote critical friends, modeled for Linda ways to disrupt harmful professional norms by emphasizing relationality in her practice.

“More-than” Moments of Critical Friendship

In this section, we each provide narratives of moments that illustrate our *more-than*-critical friendship assemblages at work. As mentioned previously, during our collective data analysis, we saw that there was something *more* happening. We define this *more-than* of our critical friendship as a relational becoming that is material-corpo-affective and more-than-human—an assemblage of our bodies, histories, shared experiences, common knowledges and language, intimate knowledge of each other, and collective identity. We also recognize that this *more-than* is a haecceity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), an intensity, a “this-ness” of moments where the immanent totality of our relationship comes into play and creates transformations in ourselves, our knowledge, and our practices. As such, our emerging definition is an agential cut that artificially bounds this intensity.

The process of locating points of transformation of our evolving object and unpacking the history of these transformations (Sannino & Engeström, 2018) helped us understand how our *more-than*-critical friendship disrupted neoliberal forces that divide, isolate, and individualize us. Below, we demonstrate how, by relocating the object of our work together, the goal we hope to achieve when came together as an activity system, we understood that our self-study assemblage contradicted neoliberal systems.

The (not so) Lost Year

During Katie’s collaborative CHAT analysis on 9.3.19, she mentioned that she thought of 2018-2019 as “the lost year.” Charity, after pointing out that a year is not a thing you can lose, asked: “Why is it a lost year? Because of the lack of [writing] productivity?” While at the 2018 Castle Conference, Katie had experienced waves of panic attacks that morphed into a severe anxiety/panic disorder, and it took a year to figure out a combination of medication, therapy, and life changes to manage her mental health. Katie admitted that, yes, she considered it a lost year because she hadn’t written much. Charity’s comment was driven by her historic knowledge of Katie’s intensive focus on academic publishing and the tendency to conflate her value with her writing productivity. Charity understood the connection between this and Katie’s anxiety disorder in a material-affective way, because she was there in Europe with Katie, staying in the same room, as she experienced the waves of panic attacks brought on by thoughts that she was “nothing but her work.” Also, Charity had several conversations during that trip, and throughout the next year, with Katie, Tammy, and Linda about Katie’s internalization of neoliberal norms of productivity and its role in producing the disorder. Her connection to Katie beyond the work—the *more-than* of critical friendship—came into play here, as she both pointed out Katie’s reproduction of herself as the ‘productive’ neoliberal subject and encouraged Katie to think about productivity as *more-than* just publication. Charity asked, “Can that be productive—thinking about it differently as a productive year?”, suggesting that perhaps healing and learning to live a healthier life can be considered productive activity. For Katie this idea “disrupt[ed] my deep conditioning” to understand that it was not a lost year simply because she did not write much—her life that year, and always, is much more than the number of articles she published.

Disrupting Neoliberal Subjectivity

During an early meeting, Linda shared three data sources with the group: her reflections following a meeting with teachers, thank-you notes from five of those teachers, and a text message in which a person of authority in the organization pointed out a mistake in a document she produced. Linda

asked us to help her examine the data using CHAT to understand why she was feeling incompetent in her role as a teacher educator. Following our discussion of the elements in Linda's activity system, Tammy summed up her thinking:

We are centering ourselves as agents who can have control over the outcomes; instead of looking at what is being produced [by the system]. Linda—you are being materially and discursively produced as a competent expert. When you are no longer a learner or seen as a learner, then these things [mistakes] are seen as failures rather than learning opportunities.

In Tammy's statement, we notice a marker of critical friendship: Tammy challenged Linda to step outside of herself to "see" her sense of being incompetent as a production of her subjectivity, her role, and the standards for being a teacher educator in her activity system. Tammy continued, "On the one hand, we are always saying we are life-long learners—from that perspective, you learned so much from this, but you are not allowed to be the learner in this activity system." Here we recognize the historicity of Linda and Tammy's relationship and can trace this exchange to their shared experiences as veteran teachers and non-traditional doctoral students seated at Linda's dining table tackling advanced quantitative statistical analyses. On these occasions, Tammy and Linda needed to remind themselves that they were positioned as learners, a subjectivity that required their full awareness as it was being produced transversely across time through their shared and separate experiences, contexts, and roles as students and teachers. From this tracing, we understand critical friendship as *more-than* an instrument for achieving an object—to provide the challenge and support necessary for developing Linda's practice. As Tammy suggested, "you learned so much from this," and their long-term *more-than*-critical friendship also mediated the violence of neoliberalism and its impact on Linda's sense of being a competent teacher educator and life-long learner.

Confronting and Activating Privilege

Tammy discussed her object for the activity system as shifting her perception of her practice as a teacher educator:

Right now, there are action steps I can take, like keep working with people who are like-minded across campus. I continue protecting myself, my work, and my sanity, by creating a resistant force through connections and participating in a community of resistance.

Linda responded by pointing out Tammy's privileged position and how much of that privilege was afforded her by her spouse's powerful position on campus. In her response, below, Linda invoked *more-than*-critical friendship to provide Tammy a different perspective, used CHAT to identify leverage points for change, and struck a balance between support and challenge.

Be really honest with yourself about your position. You have a leverage point that no one else has. Recognize that you have that privilege so that you can continue to be employed and do the work you care about. It would be naive to not recognize that.

Beyond markers of critical friendship, Linda negotiated the deep level of trust, knowledge, and affection she shared with Tammy to describe a particular perspective of power dynamics she understood could be difficult. In bringing forth their collective histories, their shared theories, and common language developed over a decade of working together, critical friendship—the object of the collaborative activity system—transformed to *more-than*-critical friendship.

Activating Relational Knowledge for Ethical Practice

The multiplicity of Charity’s identities as woman, partner, mother, professor, colleague, and administrator overlap, blur, or independently coexist, most noticeably during times of transition. During Charity’s collaborative CHAT analysis on 12.2.19, she mentioned that Tammy and Linda’s probing questions over the course of our study helped her recognize that not only are there multiple identities within each person, but also that these exist, bump up against, and fuse amid multiple contexts or nested systems. Linda, Katie, and Tammy suggested Charity complete a power analysis of her context to name some of these nested systems and dynamics at play. In the process, Linda pointed out:

Charity, you also have a tool that is available to you, and you have a certain amount of power in your role. You believe that your students and your colleagues and yourself should have someone they work with who is doing a good job for students. Are the tools being used to advance a social justice agenda? Relationships?

Linda utilized her knowledge of Charity’s intersections of identity, values, research, and expertise in ethical practice (the topic of her dissertation), and posed questions that prompted Charity to evaluate possible steps to take that honor those colleagues who consistently “do right” by students. Further, Tammy emphasized and held Charity accountable for how to implement her “real power”, and to relinquish what was beyond her control. Charity described her visceral reaction to Tammy’s challenge and the echo of her previous reminder: “We are centering ourselves as agents who can have control over the outcomes, instead of looking at what is being prompted.” Thus, blending CHAT and a complex perspective prompted a change in Charity’s understanding of ways she is being prompted by various overlapping groups and contexts at her university, allowing her to gradually become more comfortable in her role of associate dean.

Conclusion

In this study, we aimed to examine our subjectivities and practices amid changes in our settings, drawing on a posthuman lens, using CHAT as an analytic tool, and leaning on our critical friendship to make meaning in our CHAT-framed dialogues. However, our analysis demonstrated a *more-than* happening. Our posthuman lens helped us theorize this *more-than* into the emerging concept of

“*more-than-critical-friendship*,” which we see as an immanent assemblage of our past, present, and future. We are our past—our history and experiences together, the years of developing our self-study community and our relationships to one another. We are the present, “the record of what is ceasing to be,” as well as “the seeds of what we are becoming” (Braidotti, 2017, p. 10). When we come together and ‘become-et-alia’, we fuse into each other, creating a temporal collective subjectivity that enables the actualization of richer, more multifaceted, more joyous, more fulfilling virtualities (possible futures).

Additionally, viewing CHAT through a posthuman lens helped us understand the complexity underlying objects and tools as intra-acting elements that co-constitute our personal and professional lives within a larger organizational frame of neoliberalism. Our negotiations with these elements are a both/and activity: we are both satisfying various requirements set forth by our institutions, neoliberal expectations, and also engaging in pleasurable intellectual/emotional learning together, deepening our relationship and facilitating our negotiation of neoliberal spaces.

From a posthuman perspective, critical friendship is a complex, multilayered notion that is produced by, and produces, material and affective intra-actions. Others working as long-term critical friends may want to care for this aspect of their friendship and be aware of how their knowledge and practice is produced differently as a result. Additionally, this affective dimension of critical friendship needs further exploration.

Finally, we struggled mightily to fit our learning within the limits of this paper. There was so much *more-than* we could include in this paper to illustrate the haecceity of our *more-than-critical-friendship*. We include this [link](#) as a line of flight into our *more-than*.

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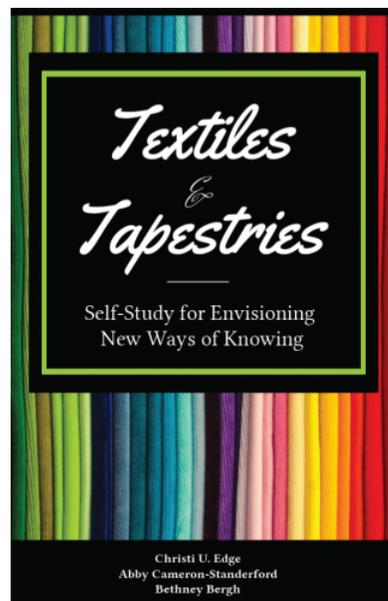
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