

## Embedding Posthumanism in Higher Education

TARU KONST  
*Turku University of Applied Sciences*

### Introduction

Posthumanism means seeing human beings as a part of nature and that nature must be considered in all actions; human beings have no right to destroy nature or set themselves above it in ethical considerations. (Wolfe 2009; Evans 2015.) The posthumanistic approach can easily be justified from numerous viewpoints, such as ethical, environmental, economic, health and well-being, and equality viewpoints. Therefore, it is essential to also consider it in educational discussion and education development. Education and curricula have a huge potential, both conceptually and politically, to forward values, attitudes and ways of thinking. However, the approaches in education are traditionally very humanistic, ignoring posthumanistic values and especially neglecting animal rights. The attitudes and habits, which are harmful for the climate and nature, are transferred to children not only from families but also from education. Schools educate children and

young people according to working life needs and expectations, which are usually based on market economy requirements (Sahlberg 2006; Tervasmäki & Tomperi 2018). This is why the educational system needs reforming. According to the latest IPCC report (IPCC 2018), we have only 12 years to make changes in order to restrain the climate change remarkably. This raises the question whether there is still time to start changing education from day-care and primary schools, or should education be able to wake up the young people in secondary and higher education as soon as possible.

This article aims to discuss how to embed the posthumanistic approach into higher education, its values, structures and processes, including its curricula. This involves changes on a strategic level, such as changes in strategic decision-making, commitment at the administrative level and the value basis, as well as changes on the operational level, such



as changes to structures and processes, curricula and practical educational solutions. The theoretical framework of this article is based on posthumanism and research on educational policies in Finland. The research material consists of curricula and education development work done at Finnish universities of applied sciences, and the main research methods are participatory observation, and content and discourse analyses of curricula. This applied and pragmatic approach can help in developing educational institutions in order that they can provide the competences required in both the current and future worlds, which calls for quick steps in education development.

### **Why a strategic perspective is needed**

An educational institution must not operate alone, making decisions without a regular dialogue with the surrounding environment, and as an outcome of such a dialogue, a set of strategic decisions must be made. Basic decisions are made on an organizational strategy level concerning the overall purpose and goals of an educational organization and how it can contribute to its environment and society, but also on an operational strategy level with respect to separate organizational functions, such as the curricula and learning methods being applied. The operational strategy level must not be neglected, because it concerns the way in which

the components of an organization effectively deliver the organizational strategy in terms of resources, processes and people. (Konst & Kairisto-Mertanen 2018.) Thus, if posthumanism begins with a real commitment on the part of the whole educational organization, it can become a real and sustainable approach that utilizes all its potential, making it possible to design strategies that are holistic rather than piecemeal.

A posthumanistic approach is a strategic choice and decision, which requires understanding and agreement on setting posthumanistic values as the basic cornerstones for those competences, which are the aim of education. At its best, it represents a philosophy that permeates the entire organization and is visible in all its activities. Students cannot be left to cope by themselves, with no special emphasis put on equipping them with all the essential tools for the future. They still need study field specific competences, forming the essential basis for professional expertise, including generic competences required in future work (such as having initiative, problem-solving skills, creativity, critical thinking, a growth mindset etc.), all these being based on posthumanistic values that make the professional expertise successful and durable in both the current and future worlds.

Making a real change in an educational institution requires strategic decision-making and management

commitment. When the current approach of the institution is questioned, the people involved may experience it as a threat. Changing the ways of thinking and operating in an organization is a complicated task that has to be initiated by the top management (Schein 1987). Schein emphasizes that change is a process that can be broken down into logical stages and that different mechanisms of change have to be managed during these stages. At the first stage, *unfreezing*, the key is both to provide discomforting information and link it to important personal goals so that guilt or anxiety will be felt and to simultaneously provide enough psychological safety so that the discomforting information will be attended to instead of denied. If through these mechanisms the target group becomes motivated to unlearn something and replace it with new learning, it will do so either by the mechanism of identifying with a new role model or by scanning the environment for the information most relevant to the problem. The actual change can then be thought of as a cognitive restructuring or redefinition of the problem that leads to new perceptions, new judgements and, ultimately, new behaviour. (Schein 1987; 2001.) In practice this means that the motivation to change must be brought into discussion (such as discussions on climate change, the scarcity of food and clean water, the extinction of species) so heavily that people become

motivated to change their behaviour. However, this must be implemented in such a way that it does not freeze people's actions or make them close their eyes, but it must be implemented so that it empowers them to feel that they are able to make changes which really matter.

This requires efforts to cultivate personal growth, in other words, it requires changes in the mindset of university staff and students. According to Dweck's research (Dweck 2006), there are two kinds of mindsets or mental models: a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. In a fixed mindset, it is believed that basic qualities, such as talent or intelligence, are fixed traits. In the growth mindset people recognize that talent is just a baseline and believe that abilities can be developed. With a fixed mindset, there are often feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, which can lead to the development of a self-defeating identity accompanied by toxic personal statements like "I can't do this". A growth mindset encourages and creates feelings of empowerment, in other words, people begin to see how they could take action in order to positively influence their community and society. Dweck's research is applicable to all people, not just students, and developing a growth mindset amongst teachers has an impact upon learning among students. An essential tool for developing a growth mindset among teachers is

formed of providing a chance for teachers to reflect upon their thoughts and ideas, and this reflection should focus less on whether the ideas are good or bad, but rather on what the teachers think about topics related to posthumanism, for example, what they have learnt about best practices and ways of acting that make a change towards a sustainable future. In addition, feedback is crucial, and by inviting the participation of the teachers in the process of dialogue and shared discussions, the feedback can be meaningful and applicable to the teacher's daily practice. Developing a growth mindset amongst students is not an immediate process; equally, encouraging teachers to see themselves in the same way will take a lengthy period of time. However, there are significant benefits achieved. A growth mindset is necessary in order to recognize opportunities for improvement, to believe that one can successfully improve and that one has the ability to make changes take place. (Dweck 2006; Fadel, Bialik and Trilling 2015.)

### **Embedding posthumanism in education – managerial views**

As stated earlier, strategic decision-making and commitment are needed first, as well as shared discussion and reflection on thoughts about why change is necessary. This kind of working period indicates that cognitive restructuring or redefinition of

the problem takes place and leads to some new perceptions and judgements. It also leads to the need and will for ultimately new behaviour. However, the implementation of the needed changes should not put on the shoulders of the teaching staff alone, that is to say, it is not sufficient to make changes in teaching contents and curricula if the processes and structures of the university are not developed simultaneously. The changes needed in processes can be, for example, changes in team working and responsibilities, in interaction/dialogue forums crossing borders (between faculties and disciplines), in co-operation models on all levels, in supporting quality systems and guidelines, and in motivation systems. The changes towards posthumanism require changes in ways of thinking and in ways of action, and therefore all university operations must be involved. It is important to create forums where people can meet and learn to know each other, and learn from each other. There must be space for criticism and for innovative and solution-oriented thinking as well. Open discussion can help a lot in determining how to conduct change in the systems without people losing face; in other words, it can help people to see new perspectives and to consider new alternatives without being made to feel that that they are the only ones having such problems. (Penttilä 2016.)

Staff training plays a key role in

embedding posthumanism in higher education. Several studies have demonstrated unawareness, even among the educated adult population, about the reasons for climate change, the living conditions of farmed animals, conflicts between their consciousness and treatment, or the impacts of animal-based food production on the environment or societal structures (e.g. European Commission 2005; Jokinen et al. 2011; Kupsala et al. 2011, 2016; Foer 2009; Deemer et Lobao 2011). Posthumanism is missing in higher education because people do not have enough knowledge and understanding about it. This is because posthumanistic themes are included in curricula only occasionally, superficially, or not at all, and because humanism, not posthumanism, has such a long tradition in education (Konst, in print; Penttilä 2012). Therefore it is necessary to provide training for the university staff and especially to include posthumanistic discussion in teacher training. Currently, teachers are not able to provide posthumanistic knowledge, skills and attitudes because they usually do not have them themselves. The teaching staff needs to know facts about climate change and the ways to solve it, animal research results on animal consciousness and treatment etc. The values and competences of teaching staff can only be changed with further training courses but, as stated earlier, it also needs time and discussion on why the change is

necessary.

Curricula have an enormous potential, both conceptually and politically, to forward values, attitudes and ways of thinking, and that is why changes in curricula are crucial. Curriculum development in a posthumanistic direction involves changes in curricula content, methods, assessment, and in staff and student involvement. The *content* should be able to provide the knowledge and skills, which are currently missing. For example, basic facts of posthumanistic themes such as climate change, and environmental and animal protection, could be included in curricula by mainstreaming, in other words by integrating these topics in applicable studies (e.g. Rohweder 2007; Penttilä 2012). The *methods* by which the content is conducted should support learning. It is not enough to provide data – learning methods and environments to generate real learning must also be activated, for example, via the problem-solving of real cases in cross-disciplinary student teams or experiential learning methods, such as innovation camps, authentic learning environments etc. Already in the 1960s, Edgar Dale theorized that learners retain more information by what they do, as opposed to what they hear or read. Today, this *learning by doing* has become known as *experiential learning* or *action learning*. When learners can perform a task, go through the real experience, participate and act

and discuss their experiences with each other, they learn best. For example, when improving awareness of food origins and the treatment of farmed animals, additional pedagogical tools to lectures and printed material (such as videos and virtual glasses) have successfully been used by animal protection organizations. The authentic learning methods are often difficult to organize, such as visits to animal farms, chicken yards and slaughterhouses or getting acquainted with individual animals. The *content* and *methods* together should help learners become aware of their place in the society and environment striving to guide learners in their own decision-making and to make them aware of the consequences that their decisions may have. Teaching and learning will then focus on critical thinking, creative problem solving and constructive procedures for posthumanistic themes instead of specific theories and methods. (Rohweder 2007; Penttilä 2012.)

The *assessment* guides learning, and therefore the assessment methods and criteria should be reconsidered too. For example, learning process and outcomes can be evaluated from several viewpoints regarding how nature is always a part of our actions and decisions (Snaza et al. 2014). *Staff involvement* in curriculum work refers to the earlier discussion about how the staff must have competences, further training and university support in order to be able to re-

lay the curriculum. *Student involvement* in embedding posthumanism in curricula means that there must be continuous discussion with students, just like with the staff, regarding why the posthumanistic approach is inevitable and how to implement it together, and this must be included in student counselling as well.

The operational level of everyday university actions needs to be reconsidered as well. This includes all actions having an impact on climate change, environmental protection, recycling, waste management and participation in the circular economy's objectives. However, the posthumanistic approach challenges us to rethink many other things too, such as what we eat, what we wear and what we consume. This means changes, for example, changes in the menus of university restaurants and cafes, in purchasing policies, material decisions etc. Briefly, a holistic and sustainable change towards posthumanism requires changes on all levels, from university values and strategic commitment, through intervening with processes and structures, and on to changes in everyday actions.

## Discussion

The practical steps on how to embed posthumanism in higher education have been briefly discussed. Each of these steps is important in making a real change and they all could be explored in more detail.

However, the aim here is to give ideas on how to begin making improvements to the current situation, which ignores or neglects posthumanism in educational policies and decision-making. The significant first steps are the discussion on the necessity for change, management commitment to chosen values, staff training and embedding the topic in curricula.

The focus in this article is on higher education, but the approach is applicable and useful for all levels of educational

institutions. By paying attention to posthumanism in educational values and by renewing structures, processes and curriculum work in education, we can get new relevant tools with which to build a more sustainable society and future for all species. The invisible and ignored topics with respect to posthumanism must be made common, transparent and explicitly expressed when developing higher education.

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