

Reflections

Beyond imagining: enacting intergenerational response-ability as world-building – commentary to Bowman

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This Reflection considers Bowman’s call to researchers to respond to young peoples’ concerns about the climate crisis as a "world-building project" suggesting that researchers can support young people by helping them imagine the future. Drawing on the work of Barad and Haraway, I want to widen the call by suggesting that researchers need to respond to the climate crisis through enactments of mutual response-ability. The challenge is how adults concerned with the climate crisis can work alongside young people to promote and create effective change. But more than that it is about researchers, universities, and others making change. Young people are protesting because they want adults to secure their future: the important question is how we best do this.

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In response to Bowman’s (2019) “Imagining future worlds alongside young climate activists: a new framework for research” I want to focus on three themes which thread through the paper. I will touch on the notion of imagining futures, explore young people’s agency and, most importantly, grapple with the urgent need for taking action on climate change. This need for action will be explored through the notion of mutual response-ability (Barad, as quoted by Dolphijn, R. & van der Tuin, I. 2013; Haraway 2016) and draw on my experience working with the Manchester Environmental Education Network (MEEN).

Bowman’s paper is itself a response to the research of Wahlström and colleagues (2019) where researchers handed out surveys and ran screening interviews at Fridays for Future demonstrations to understand the rise of the climate youth movement. The Wahlström data is useful as it captures a specific moment in the movement by informing us about who is demonstrating and their reasons for doing so and, as I was one of the volunteers collecting data at the Manchester demonstration, I found Wahlström and colleagues’ data fascinating.

However, I also agree with Bowman’s point that, “Climate action is more than protest: it is also a world-building project, and creative methodologies can aid researchers and young climate activists as we imagine, together, worlds’ of the future” (Bowman 2019, 197).

As an environmental educator working with MEEN and young people on climate change it is clear the imagination is a powerful tool for exploring how we want our collective future to be. There are many examples of pedagogical tools that facilitate the imagination as a means for building future worlds: one of MEEN's rather unusual examples includes the building of a cardboard time machine for families to imagine the potential impacts of climate change in relation to current behaviours. However, rather than citing examples of our future imaginings – for which I have no evidence in relation to making tangible changes – I want to focus on the importance of our creative imaginings becoming methodologies that can also *enact the building* of the new world as it is being imagined. Furthermore, I want to stress that this is a process that can unfold through processes of mutual response-ability (Barad 2012; Haraway 2016).

Firstly though, I want to discuss what is meant by mutual response-ability. In Barad's theory of agential realism agency does not belong to subjects but is rather an enactment formed through our mutual responses as they are performed through the on-going dynamism of the world. Agential realism is therefore relational in the sense that the world unfolds through processes of continual "intra-action" which contain "the possibilities of mutual response, which is not to deny, but to attend to power imbalances" (Barad, as quoted by Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2013).

Attending to our worldly relations is essential when addressing an issue like climate change, including how we can relate and work with young people. As Haraway (2016, 29) writes, "We are all responsible to and for shaping conditions for multispecies flourishing in the face of terrible histories... but we are not all response-able in the same ways. The differences matter."

Returning to Bowman's (2019, 295) discussion about Greta Thunberg it is necessary to keep such differences in mind. He states that it is "our task" to respond to Thunberg's call, "to act as if the house is on fire", and I concur. In full Thunberg states:

I do not want your hope. I want you to panic, I want you to feel the fear I feel everyday and then I want you to act. I want you to act as if you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire because it is. (Thunberg 2018)

Thunberg is very clear that her imagining is not a metaphor: it is reality. Our house is our world. She has read the science and imagined the future science is conveying and her skill is her ability to share this imagined future without compromise. She is afraid and anyone who has read the science should be afraid with her. I am afraid. This fear is based on the rationale that we are not doing enough, quickly enough, to address the problems and that there is a gulf between what we know and what we do. In light of this, exercising our imagination to create worlds of the future is valuable but it is also necessary to take mutually response-able action otherwise the gap between what we know and how we act in relation to the climate crisis is only exacerbated (Kollmus & Agyeman 2002).

The young people I meet and work with through my role in MEEN express concern about not being able to do enough to meet the challenges we face and, because of this gap, express a mixture of emotions on climate change including negative emotions such as saying they are confused why we have not addressed the problem yet, or that they feel sad or even terrified that climate change is out of control, or even guilty because of their own lifestyles and such emotions echo the findings of Wahlström and others (2019) report "Protest for a Future". Bowman's (2019, 301) summary of this research states that young activists stand, "with one foot in the public arena and one in the private" in that the Fridays for Future participants are able to express their emotions whilst also pushing to exert pressure on politicians. This knowledge has value yet, the crucial point of the demonstrations is that young people are demanding that adults take effective action to prevent extreme climate change so, as Thunberg would state, young people can go back to school.

Researching the voices of young people is important however, I am arguing that responding to the issues raised by them through enacting mutual response-ability is the most crucial response. If we can assume we are at the juncture where action is critical then the next question is how to enact mutual response-ability especially given its complexity as an open-ended process which occurs spontaneously and through specific relations. As Barad (2010, 265) states, response-ability is not a "calculation to be performed" but a state to be practised. This means that to perform mutually response-able actions in relation to the demands of young people we must listen with care because

as Haraway (2016, 29) puts it, "The details matter. The details link actual beings to actual response-abilities." Having listened to young peoples' responses as they watched an adult jump into a taxi outside their school after having rewarded the pupils for their actions on climate change it is easy to understand how young people might come to feel disillusioned.

Returning to MEEN's activities there is the strong intention to act with response-ability when working with young people, however, meeting their demands and those of the adults in school needs to be negotiated. Young people may be keen to go on demonstrations, or even to organise their own, as they want their voices to be heard and, although some schools hear this and respond by supporting their demands, others do not. But there are multiple methods for supporting youth voice. MEEN projects, for example, ask pupils if they would like to become community educators on climate change. If they agree we work with a range of partners to organise intergenerational conferences or climate classrooms where young people talk to the public or a set audience, sharing learning activities or ideas around climate change (Brown & Lock 2017; Lock 2019). Most recently a group of high school pupils ran a session on climate change for trainee STEM teachers at The University of Manchester, which not only boosted young people's confidence and voice but also raised questions around trainee teacher's curriculum plans (MEEN 2020). Giving young people the opportunities to do such activities helps them voice issues around climate change, expand their confidence for intergenerational communication and exert pressure on adults to take action.

However, as Bowman (2019, 299) states, "The public imagination of the climate crisis tends to restrict young people to having a voice, as opposed to having power" and he suggests that "society tends to perceive young people as subjects of political engagement more than agents of change." Yet, gaining knowledge and finding a voice, enables increased power and influence. Through the experience of raising their voices and through being heard by peers, family, teachers and sometimes those in greater power, young people, working with others, are responding to the climate emergency with increased agency. A good example is the Teach the Future campaign which, led by young people, is demanding action on improving climate change education in England in line with the demands of the emergency and for all educational buildings to be net-zero by 2030. Yet, for formal changes to be made to the education system acts of mutual response-ability need to occur and this means the Secretary of State for Education must enact changes that align school activities with the climate emergency declaration.

Returning to Thunberg, when she demands that adults read the science she also demands that adults take appropriate action in light of the science. Young people involved in MEEN activities share this view and often reach a point when they state their eco group is not doing enough to stop climate change. This sticky point in the intra-action (Barad 2007) between MEEN and young people is vital as it provokes an enactment of mutual response-ability whereby the team need to decide what they want to do with MEEN responding by co-ordinating the means to do it. One recurring activity is tree planting which has become a core part of MEEN's climate related activities. In feedback pupils have cited it as one of the most significant parts of a MEEN climate project and have repeatedly made requests to plant more trees. Trees may not hold all the answers to solving the climate crisis but they do make a positive difference in our climate relations; they clean our air and can form valuable habitat. Organising tree planting can be a response-able action that makes a material difference.

Bowman's (2019, 302) article concludes that, "There is much work to be done for scientists who wish to listen," however, I would suggest that if we are listening to what young people are saying our work needs to be much more than listening: we really do need to "act as if our house is on fire" (Thunberg 2018). Barad (2007, 817) states that the world is an "ongoing open process of mattering through which 'mattering' itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities." This states that we are a part of the world's dynamic and, if life on earth is to survive, we must attend to our actions and the agential possibilities they manifest. This is not suggesting a move towards "the privatization of responsibility" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 139) but rather "engaging ordinary personal practices as *collective* and pushing toward a decentring of ethical subjectivity" (*ibid.*, 138).

How can we do this? As academics we can respond to young peoples' voices through addressing our "ordinary personal practices" and although we may imagine these are private matters, our practices are involved in the "knots of relations" (Barad 2007) involving humans such as climate scientists, institutions such as our universities, alongside the multiple physical entanglements of our

human/non-human collective activities. However, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 142) writes, “if the ethical is complex and emerging, this also involves chances to contribute to its shaping” so whether we are able to challenge and support our universities to act on climate issues or as citizens make ethical and sustainable choices in our travel, purchases and leisure; or politically develop our collective voice by enacting response-able leadership in our communities we are helping to build an imagined future through mutual response-ability.

In addition, universities have the means to work with young people not only through protest but also through the provision of intergenerational world-building activities that can generate hope through making a difference now. Thinking with mutual response-ability in mind, I am also concluding that MEEN’s response must be to support whole school communities so they are better able to respond to young peoples’ urgent demands for building and retrofitting zero carbon schools. Such activities are urgent.

In conclusion therefore, I would state that as researchers we need to both listen to young people and respond to what they are saying and we can do this not only through being response-able in relation to our collective actions but also through generating intergenerational opportunities to help all our collective imaginings come into being.

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