

# reply: education is intentional – but intention is not enough: a reply to Norm Friesen

Maksymilian Chutorański

This reply engages with Norm Friesen's critique of posthumanist, sociomaterial, and actor-network approaches to education. I argue that Friesen is right to insist that education requires intention, purpose, normativity, and responsibility, since without them education would become indistinguishable from any other form of change, influence, or relation. However, this does not mean that intention exhausts the educational situation. Educational action is always situated, mediated, and co-constituted by relations that no intention fully establishes or controls. Drawing on posthumanist and material engagement perspectives, the reply suggests that pedagogical intention should be understood not as a prior mental project simply realised in practice, but as an orientation that becomes specified and transformed in action. The article therefore proposes that posthumanism does not abolish educational responsibility; rather, it extends it beyond the horizon of intended aims, toward the wider transformations that educational action sets in motion.

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In 2018, Norm Friesen responded to Siân Bayne's article *Posthumanism: A navigation aid for educators* (2018) by formulating one of the most forceful critiques of posthumanist, sociomaterial, and actor-network approaches to education. His objection was simple and powerful: if we begin to understand education as distributed among human and nonhuman actors, we risk losing what makes it education in the first place — intention, purpose, normativity, and responsibility. Friesen explicitly argues that education presupposes agency, decision, intention, and will, and that its practices, artefacts, and discourses are unavoidably purposive and normative.

This article is a belated attempt to enter that discussion. Belated only in a chronological sense, since the problem Friesen raised has not lost its significance. On the contrary, it seems even more urgent today. It concerns one of the central tensions in contemporary philosophy of education: how can we take seriously posthumanist and new materialist insights into the complexity of the world without losing the classical pedagogical question of what allows us to distinguish education from what is not education?

On the one hand, posthumanist, sociomaterial, and new materialist approaches help us see that education always takes place in a complex world: among things, technologies, bodies, spaces, infrastructures, energy, environments, and nonhuman actors. On the other hand, classical pedagogical reflection reminds us that not every relation, change, or configuration of the world is education. If everything that happens is described as a network of relations, the question inevitably returns: what still allows us to recognise an action as educational? (see Chutorański, 2026)

In this sense, Friesen is right to insist on intentionality, purposiveness, normativity, and responsibility. These are conditions of the pedagogical recognisability of education. The problem, however, is that Friesen moves from this valid claim to a stronger conclusion. From the fact that education requires intentionality, it does not follow that intentionality constitutes the substance of the entire educational relation.

Friesen's critique rests, I suggest, on two problematic shifts. First, it treats the problem of agency as if it were a zero-sum game: either the human being is the autonomous source of action, or agency becomes entirely dispersed and lost. Second, it blurs the distinction between the pedagogical recognition of an action and the description of the relations of which that action is composed. From the fact that education requires purposes and intentions, Friesen draws the conclusion that its reality can be described primarily in terms of human purposiveness.

The question of intentionality in education need not, however, be decided according to an all-or-nothing logic. The intentionality of educational action does not disappear once we acknowledge that action is situated, mediated, and co-constituted by relations. Rather, we need to ask how intentionality operates within a situation that is never composed solely of human intentions.

Friesen's argument takes intentionality as given and asks whether posthumanism can preserve it. When it appears that posthumanism cannot preserve intentionality in the same form, the conclusion follows: posthumanism is inadequate for education because it removes what is pedagogically essential. Yet this reasoning depends on a prior assumption. It assumes that because education requires intention, intention explains the entire educational situation. But intention allows us to recognise an action as pedagogical; it does not exhaust the relations of which that action is composed.

Posthumanist approaches invite us to suspend precisely this assumption. The claim that classrooms are "constructed by humans for normative human ends" (Friesen, 2018, p. 1) is, of course, correct. But it is not the whole story. Classrooms are designed by humans, but once designed they do not merely realise human intentions. They also shape, constrain, displace, materialise, and sometimes resist those intentions. The arrangement of desks, lighting, acoustics, bodily rhythms, technologies, documents, platforms, and infrastructures are not merely a passive background to human purposes. They participate in what can be thought, said, noticed, overlooked, or recognised as pedagogically significant.

Even when a teacher enters a situation with a clear plan, pedagogical intention is not simply carried out; it is specified and adjusted in action. It takes shape in pupils' responses, in the resistance of the material, in available tools, in the rhythm of the classroom, and in the time and space of the lesson. Intentionality does not disappear, but it operates among relations that it does not itself establish.

Lambros Malafouris's (2013) theory of material engagement helps clarify this point. Intention is not something the mind first possesses and the body then executes, but something that emerges and becomes determinate through material engagement with things. Pedagogical intention therefore need not be understood as a prior mental project subsequently realised through words, gestures, and tools. It may instead be understood as an orientation of action that becomes increasingly determinate in relation to pupils, tools, signs, errors, and the resistances of the situation.

To call such a situation "teaching," however, we must single out a certain configuration: teacher,

pupils, object of attention, purpose, and responsibility. This act of singling out is necessary, for without it education would dissolve into a general description of relations. Yet it is always partial. It reveals the pedagogical meaning of an action, but not everything that the action sets in motion.

This partiality is not a mistake. Without it, pedagogy would be unable to distinguish education from any change, influence, interaction, or process. But precisely for that reason, it requires critical reflection. Every pedagogical ordering of the world makes something visible and leaves something else in the background. It allows us to see the teacher's intention, the relation with the pupil, the object of shared attention, and the normative stakes of action. At the same time, it marginalises other relations that continue to participate in what takes place.

Educational situations are therefore never only educational: every pedagogical act does more than it intends. A lesson does not merely transmit knowledge, organise attention, or shape the pupil's relation to the world. In doing education, we also transform the world in a sense broader than the pedagogical: we activate technologies, consume energy, organise space, engage bodies, things, and infrastructures. This wider range most often remains outside the horizon of pedagogical intentionality.

From this perspective, posthumanism does not negate intentionality; it relativises it. It shows that intentionality is always partial, situated, and achieved within a wider field of relations that it does not control. It does not remove normativity, but forces us to ask a more difficult question: how should we think normativity in a world where educational action never belongs exclusively to human intentions?

This also has consequences for responsibility. Friesen suggests that without a strong concept of agency we lose the possibility of accountability and critique. Yet focusing exclusively on intention risks narrowing responsibility to the question of whether an action achieved its intended aim. In response to Friesen, we might therefore say: posthumanism and new materialism do not abolish teacher responsibility; rather, they open up questions concerning its new domains.

What is at stake, in particular, are the non-educational ways in which teaching changes the world: the technologies, spaces, bodies, energies, infrastructures, and relations that are activated, stabilised, or transformed in the course of pedagogical action. Responsibility here does not mean full control over all consequences. It means, rather, a readiness to acknowledge that educational action does not end with its pedagogical aim. The teacher is not responsible for everything that happens in the world, but neither can responsibility be said to end where intention ends.

In this sense, posthumanist approaches do not weaken responsibility; they make it more demanding. They require educators to reflect not only on what they intend, but also on what their actions set in motion — on the transformations they enable, the exclusions they produce, and the relations they reconfigure. This does not mean abandoning normativity. It means extending it beyond the narrow horizon of purpose.

Friesen asks to whom educational posthumanism is addressed. One possible answer is: to those who are willing to acknowledge that education always exceeds what it intends, and who are willing to take responsibility for that excess.

The issue, then, is not a choice between intention and entanglement. It is to understand how intention operates within entanglement, and how what exceeds intention nevertheless continues to

shape the educational event. Only the tension between the two allows us to see the real problem: education must be pedagogically recognisable, but it is never ontologically pure.

Education is intentional. But intention is not enough.

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