



Don't Trust Completely What You Just Read

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Don't trust completely what you just read

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The *Skillful Teacher* by Stephen D. Brookfield is insightful and practical. Written for college teachers, it examines adult learning from the point of view of both teacher and learner. Brookfield uses three motifs — experimental, practical, and inspirational— integrating vignettes written in a conversational tone, with the intention that this book is of use to working teachers “for encouragement after a bad day in the classroom” (p. xiv).

Brookfield’s notion of “skillful teaching” at the college level is grounded in critical theory, particularly Jürgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse, and relies on “four core assumptions:”

- Skillful teaching is “whatever helps students learn.”
- The best teachers are critically reflective practitioners
- The most important knowledge is how students experience their learning and our teaching
- Teachers should always treat students as adults

These four core assumptions combine theory and practice, teaching, and learning, and send an inspirational message to all teachers that we can all be skillful teachers, as we all know about and have tried at least some of the four. In addition to the inspiration, the core value of this book rests on the practical strategies that teachers can use to put theory into practice.

Rewritten from previous two editions, the *Skillful Teacher* contains twenty chapters, six of them new. Chapters 1-2 spell out the core four assumptions of skillful teachers; Chapter 3 goes deeper into the student experience, describing ways in which teachers can find out how students experience their teaching, and providing specific information on the Classroom Incident Questionnaire to get at the relevant issues. Chapters 4 and 5 look more closely at the student experience, considering two characteristics of skillful teachers Brookfield says students “value the most—credibility and authenticity,” and then examines the “emotional rhythms of student learning,” demonstrating ways in which teachers can respond to those rhythms.

Chapters 6 through 19 are practice focused, some taking the point of view of a teacher and some that of a student. Six of these chapters are brand new to the third edition. These chapters cover topics such as classroom techniques (lectures, discussion, integrating elements of play, teaching in teams, teaching online), dealing with classroom diversity and power relations within the classroom, teaching about racism, encouraging critical thinking, evaluating and assessing student learning, and the problem of student resistance to taking responsibility for their own learning (not to mention resistance to learning at all). The book ends with Chapter 20 providing 16 maxims with which Brookfield attempts to summarize skillful teaching, such as “Expect Ambiguity,” “Perfection Is an Illusion,” “Remember that Learning is Emotional,” and “Don’t Trust What you Just Read.” In keeping with Brookfield’s critical theoretical stance, the explanation

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of that last maxim deliberately references the book's preceding 275 pages, warning the reader that "everything in this book should be regarded with great skepticism" (p. 276).

There are many insightful vignettes, useful techniques, and valuable insights in this book that will be helpful and inspirational for college teachers, many of whom being assigned to teach with little formal training and (often) even less in the way of supervision and mentorship. Moreover, the new chapters dealing with developments that may have been visible in 2006 but which certainly loom much larger today—teaching about racism, teaching online, and playful learning are three good examples—are certainly welcome additions to Brookfield's classic work.

At the same time, although the author intended to write in a conversational tone, there are curious omissions within the philosophical and disciplinary genealogy implicit in Brookfield's vision of critical theory. For example, his stance is very much one of critical reflection, something he acknowledges in his second "core assumption," yet none of the major thinkers contributing to ideas and practices of critical reflection appears in the book: John Dewey, Donald Schön, Max Van Manen, Jack Mezirow, Kenneth Zeichner. Only Paolo Freire appears in the reference list, and the two mentions he receives (pages 24 and 70) are glancing at best. Similarly absent from Brookfield's vignettes—despite his references to critical theory, Foucault, Habermas, and an entire chapter on power relations—is the macro world outside the classroom. For example, in discussing student resistance to learning in Chapter 16, he neglects to mention that most college students today work as well as study and often feel forced to put work first, study second. This situation is a direct result of the spiraling cost of tuition and fees, which is itself a direct result of public disinvestment in higher education coupled with Baumol's cost disease. Education scholars focused on K-12 education have managed to make use of critical theory to examine both the micro classroom environment as well as the macro societal context of both teaching and learning; surely the same can be done for higher education as.

Moreover, the chapters on diversity and teaching about racism, although well-intentioned and informed by his own experiences with narrative pedagogy, focus much on the personal level such as prejudice and micro-aggressions, and not at all on the institutional level such as poverty, systemic exclusion, and the myriad assumptions that first-generation college students of any color have not been taught to make. A confessional approach to race like this, which emphasizes the need for personal disclosure among white college teachers, certainly has the potential to help students understand how racism works. However, it provides limited guidance for fostering critical reflection among white students on their racism and how to transform their actions.

With all that, Brookfield's latest edition of his classic work *The Skillful Teacher* is meant to inspire the weary college teacher, and to a great extent, it should achieve that noble goal. Certainly there are more detailed books on achieving success with online teaching, but Brookfield's single chapter of advice is all an experienced teacher needs to shift from face-to-face to online classes. Similarly, his suggestions of how to learn about student learning and students' response to teaching are quite valuable to any college teacher who suspects that there is more to the educational endeavor than the flawless reportage of lecture notes.