



Inclusive Teaching: Presence in the Classroom (New Directions for Teaching and Learning, Number 140)

Thomas, Cornell, ed.
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Book Review

Tags: civic engagement | inclusive teaching | intellectual hospitality

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In his opening essay in the collection, editor Cornell Thomas of Texas Christian University invites readers to envision a new type of pedagogy that sees each student as a “unique being with the potential for great growth” (2). The educational philosophies of John Dewey and bell hooks grace the pages of this volume, even when they are not cited directly. The strength of this small collection lies in its variety. Ranging from an existentialism-inspired clarion call for the importance of “presence” in the classroom (Don Hufford) to a challenge posed to teachers and other mentors (in and out of the classroom) to integrate “criticality” and identity development in order to better meet the needs of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Anthony Walker), the essays are unfortunately a bit uneven when it comes to offering specific strategies and details about best practices.

Prophetic calls for practicing “intellectual hospitality” and the value of more robust “connectedness” with our students are preaching ideas to the already converted, I suspect. Most readers of this journal likely already practice such pedagogy and are committed to creating “environments that maximize learners’ academic and social growth” (back cover). Some of the essays rely upon the briefest of anecdotes. The shining counter-example to that trend is the longer piece by Freyca Calderon Berumen and Cecilia Silva (also from Texas Christian University), describing a creative example of civic engagement for preservice teachers in an ESL class: students were matched up with newly resettled refugee families from Nepal and Burma in order to help with initial visits to local schools. The unexpected successes of their “Refugee Family Project” offers a nice example of why it is important for us to be authentic and creative if we are truly committed to more inclusive teaching.

The essays offering concrete advice or descriptions of successful projects are the most rewarding, and some of the bibliographies offer further resources for anyone interested in exploring how critical race theory might be applied to our pedagogies and practices in higher education. In this vein, Kimberly Diggles' essay is particularly helpful, as she lays out specific suggestions for implementing cross-institutional efforts that are not just racially aware but actively anti-racist in their intent and in their transformative effects on campus culture and student learning. I also appreciated Anthony Walker's call for involving students in curricular reform as an antidote to what is otherwise "a propensity for an ideological stasis" (78). Walker goes on to state that, "a curriculum built for the integration of students' thoughts and experiences has the ability to create a learning environment in which students are connected and engaged" (79). To the degree that teachers in religious studies have worked to develop such learning environments in their classrooms in recent years, Walker's insights suggest that we should take the lead in larger curricular change.

Unfortunately, given its brevity and the uneven quality of the essays, the collection does not ultimately deliver what is promised by the summary on the book jacket.

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