

Reflective Teaching

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Transforming the Academy: Faculty Perspectives on Diversity and Pedagogy

Willie-LeBreton, Sarah, ed.
Rutgers University Press, 2016

Book Review

Tags: classroom authority | diversity | mentoring

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Date Reviewed: September 15, 2017

As diversity initiatives become more prominent in higher education, this volume features the perspectives of faculty on the progress and challenges of a diverse academy. The first-hand accounts shared through these autoethnographies manage to be simultaneously thought-provoking, memory-inducing, and pedagogy inspiring.

Rather than a superficial treatment on numerical diversity when whiteness and its privileges are normative, this collection focuses on difference, but difference in this sense is not presented one-dimensionally. The editor offers, “When we focus on difference, rather than race, class, gender, disability, or sexuality only, we come to understand how each of these characteristics fits into the oppression/privilege paradigm much more clearly” (4).

The book is organized by two overarching themes. In Part One, “Challenging Classrooms,” the authors describe the multiple ways and meanings of having their credibility or classroom authority challenged or accepted. For example, as the first and only professor, your very presence may be triggering for students, resulting in recognition, awkward expression, and then resistance. Student evaluations may indicate “pleasant surprise” that a Black professor “so smart and articulate” (51), and that the student didn’t really listen at first because expectations of a Black person went unmet.

The chapters in Part Two, “Witnessing Protest,” acknowledge that college professors often teach life lessons in addition to the subject matter and that we may undergo transformations ourselves as we guide and mentor students through life situations, and as we bear witness to the experiences of students and colleagues. The contributors not only share their experiences as teachers, they also recall memories of being students themselves, including the impacts of

shifting individual and collective identities. They describe resilience in the face of presumed incompetence, unwelcoming classroom environments, and unfavorable course evaluations.

Challenged by their own recognitions, authors allowed their heightened awareness and sensitivity to inform self-reflection. For example, a student's persistent inquiry about a contributor's background and the kinds of schools that she attended resulted in the importance of recognizing her own "class privilege." However, with that recognition came the worry that she "unconsciously wielded" that "privilege in order to combat racial stereotypes."

Another contributor raised the issue of the reluctance of embracing disability as diversity in the academy, offering that as "object other," disability is "viewed through frameworks of pathology and abnormalcy rather than those of identity and human diversity" (115). An accommodation as seemingly simple as making sure that the classroom community angled their bodies so that a student could read their lips created a richer learning environment for everyone.

Throughout the narratives, there are pedagogical recognitions that lead to suggestions and models of small adjustments making meaningful impact. Students come with their own perspectives and should be encouraged to see themselves as "co-creators" of their educational experience (58). In a demonstration of the power and subtleties of language, one contributor instituted the "ouch" rule, whereby an offended person can say "ouch" and then pause for analysis of the offense (61).

Some pedagogical insights arose from the students' interpretation of and engagement with assignments. For example, in a photography self-portrait assignment, one student proactively cast herself in three stereotypes of Black women that she had often confronted, prompting visible discussions in effort to "redirect misperceptions" (78).

The audience that may be reached by this book is wide-ranging, from graduate students to administrators and board members. All may benefit from the profoundly vulnerable, yet honest viewpoints offered.

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