

Book Review

***The Skillful Teacher:
On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom*** (2nd Edition)
Stephen D. Brookfield (Jossey-Bass, 2006)

Review by

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This second edition of Brookfield's book covers a wide variety of topics relevant to the issue of effective teaching. A key addition is a chapter on online teaching, and material in other chapters has been updated as well. Brookfield presents numerous anecdotally- and research-based strategies for creating an effective classroom learning environment, including practical suggestions for facilitating classroom discussion, conducting formative evaluations of student learning, and grading class participation and essays. Many of Brookfield's suggestions are also aimed at making the classroom environment rewarding for teachers; the aforementioned suggestions for grading class participation and essays are intended to make the educational process more productive for teachers as well as students, and he also details the qualities that students value in teachers and provides practical information regarding the possibility of "cultural suicide" and how both teachers and students can avoid it.

Brookfield's general message is reassuring and supportive, seen in assertions such as the notion that ambiguity and risk of failure are inherent parts of the educational process, and he ends the book with a collection of fifteen "maxims" that underscore the rest of the book's material in an affirming manner. The book's material draws from a significant body of pedagogical research addressing topics such as critical thinking, adult learning, and cultural diversity, and research from other fields such as psychotherapy, social psychology, and linguistics is incorporated to underscore certain points.

However, certain aspects of Brookfield's book are less appealing. The book's conversational style becomes a little too conversational at times, with parenthetical asides punctuated with exclamation points. In Chapter Two, when discussing the need for teachers to adopt a critically reflective perspective on their activities, he appears to equate "research" with evaluation of one's own experiences and not necessarily objective study (although, as noted above, Brookfield provides significant and impressive scholarly justification for the points in his book). Although he repeatedly emphasizes the need for teachers to model critical thinking for their students, he does not always provide clear instructions for how to do this until significantly later in the book.

Finally, Brookfield devotes a significant amount of time exhorting the virtues of "Critical Incident Questionnaires" (CIQs), a weekly assessment that asks students to identify the most and least engaging, most helpful, most confusing, and most surprising aspects of that week's classes. The teacher then collects the CIQs and

looks for common themes, which then are addressed at the beginning of the following week's classes. While such an approach has tangible merits, Brookfield appears to overstate the value of the CIQs. He claims that they provide a "direct, unfiltered account of students' experiences" (p. 46), yet students' comments are not anonymous, which could call into question just how direct and unfiltered they are. Furthermore, Brookfield also notes that students frequently make notes to themselves during class about things they plan to include on their CIQs and states that "a real turning point is reached when students ask for the CIQ to be distributed early so they can complete them as the class is proceeding" (p. 47). While the students' enthusiasm and facility for reflective learning is impressive, the reader wonders how much attention the students are paying to the course material if they are completing the CIQ during class. His exhortation of the use of CIQs is also somewhat at odds with his acknowledgement that college and university faculty already have a lot to do at their jobs, and suggestions for using this type of strategy in large classes are somewhat lacking.

Nevertheless, the book as a whole is engaging, practical, and applicable to a wide range of teaching situations. It draws on the significant experience of a seasoned teacher as well as well-established research from a variety of disciplines, and provides many examples and suggestions that, even if they are not directly applicable to a specific situation, can be adapted and modified to be more suitable. Above all, Brookfield's acknowledgement that being a skillful teacher does not mean being a perfect teacher should prove comforting for both novice and veteran teachers alike.