

BOOK REVIEWS/RECENSIONS

THE SKILLFUL TEACHER

Stephen D. Brookfield. 1990. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

As part of the Jossey-Bass Higher Education series, Brookfield's latest book "is really a survival manual...meant to help college teachers work their way through the recurring problems and dilemmas they inevitably face in their practice" (p. xi). In what is becoming a Brookfield tradition, he utilizes a simple, concise, and easily read writing style without being simplistic or trivializing the problems of effective teaching. Purposely free of adult education jargon, the work attempts to include teachers beyond the adult education professionals who are familiar with Brookfield's work and speak to practitioners in higher education. Written from an adult learning and adult education perspective, *The Skillful Teacher*, seeks "to offer insights, advice, and practical suggestions" (p. xii) to "college educators for whom teaching students is a major part of their professional responsibility" (p. xvi).

Much of Brookfield's earlier work championed the concept of self-directed learning. In 1988 Brookfield wrote a significant essay explaining why he felt that over-identification with the concept of self-directed learning was dangerous for the field of adult education. In this essay Brookfield explains that the acceptance of self-directed learning diminishes the contribution of the educator and gives rise to several theory-practice contradictions. This book represents a maturing of Brookfield's thought on the teaching/learning transaction and his recognition that a teacher has a tremendous responsibility and impact upon students.

It is appropriate that Brookfield address the realm of higher education as that has been his primary teaching field for the past twenty years. *The Skillful Teacher* is based upon Brookfield's own teaching experience and the experience of numerous other college teachers. Discarding the heavily referenced scholarly approach in order to communicate "directly and personally" (p. xv) to practicing teachers, Brookfield organizes this

book around three major themes: the experiential, the inspirational, and the practical dimensions of teaching. Having shared with us in previous books some of his ideas on the practical and experiential aspects of teaching (previously titled facilitation) what sets this current book apart is inclusion of the inspirational dimension. Brookfield clearly has a passionate respect for the teaching/learning transaction. He succeeds in leaving the reader with the belief that college teachers can, do, and should make a difference to their student and to the larger society.

The Skillful Teacher describes teaching as the “educational equivalent of white-water rafting” (p. 2). Cautioning us to be wary of the myth that perfect teachers exist, since “all teachers sooner or later capsizes” (p. 2), Brookfield challenges us to teach responsively through developing an understanding of the student’s experience. We are reminded that students attribute tremendous symbolic significance to even the trivial and unintentional actions of teachers.

Driven by trust, students admire and respond to two key aspects of teaching: authenticity and credibility. Authenticity comes from the perception of the teacher as a real person, honest and open, with congruence between words and actions. Such a teacher exhibits a readiness to admit error, and conveys the impression that he or she has a life outside the classroom and interests beyond the discipline being taught. Credibility arises from the belief that the teacher has significant breadth and depth of knowledge and knows where the class is going. “They realize they are under the guidance of someone who is experienced, insightful and, above all committed” (p. 19-20).

Continuing to describe what he has learned about how students experience teaching, Brookfield devotes a chapter to understanding some of the tensions and emotions of the learning process. Identified by example are the imposter syndrome, emotionality, challenge, reflection, incremental fluctuation, and unexpectedness. In the chapter titled “Adjusting Teaching to the Rhythms of Learning” Brookfield describes how teachers can become more responsive to the ways students experience learning by utilizing techniques to reduce the imposter syndrome, to foster challenge, and to allow for reflective speculation, and the building upon the unexpected.

Switching from the student’s experience to that of the teacher, Brookfield includes a series of chapters that tackle the important topics

of resistance to learning, building trust with students, and dealing with the political realities of teaching. He gives several potential reasons for the resistance to learning and offers specific advice on how to overcome each type of resistance. As the student's resistance to learn is often related to a lack of trust, practical "how to" advice is given on building trust and balancing credibility and authenticity. The section concludes with an interpretation of college teaching as a political activity utilizing Brookfield's own personal interpretation of political activity. This emphasizes teaching techniques that provide alternative interpretation of experience and the challenging of society's "givens". It will come as no surprise to readers of Brookfield's previous works that "the main political purpose of teaching is not to transmit a particular ideology; instead, it is to help students develop a critically alert cast of mind" (p. 189).

The core of the book contains a wealth of practical advice on creative lecturing, preparing for and facilitating discussions, the use of a variety of teaching techniques (role playing and simulations) and instruction on giving helpful evaluations. The section needs to be interpreted as an experienced educator sharing what works for him (Brookfield is fond of calling it "a theory in use") otherwise the personal tone of the book is lost and the writing becomes heavily prescriptive and technical, listing do's and don't's devised of the holistic discussion we've come to expect from Brookfield.

Stephen Brookfield's book is a rich resource which should serve to help professionals reflect upon their practice. It concludes with a discussion of "some truths about teaching" and offers specific advice on skillful teaching". Should Brookfield continue to write for larger audiences and succeed in translating the ideas of adult education and adult learning theory into higher education and beyond it is possible that he will become to the field of education what Peter Drucker has become to management; a scholar who educates and influences practitioners in the field through incisive and challenging writing. This book marks a significant step in that direction.

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