

Brookfield, Stephen D.. *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991. Pages xxii, 233. Reviewed by David Mandzuk, University of Manitoba.

In *The Skillful Teacher*, Stephen D. Brookfield, a professor in the Department of Higher and Adult Education at Columbia University, presents what he calls a "survival manual" designed to help college teachers deal effectively with the predictable problems and conflicts faced by most teachers at the post-secondary level. In doing so, Brookfield addresses a broad range of topics from "Teaching Responsively" and "Adjusting Teaching to Rhythms of Learning" to "Dealing with the Political Realities of Teaching" and "Overcoming Resistance to Learning." Moreover, Brookfield uses three broad themes – the experiential, the inspirational, and the practical – to provide the theoretical framework for the book.

On the experiential plane, Brookfield presents an accurate portrayal of college teaching. He emphasizes students' perspectives on learning, and addresses the non-instructional problems that teachers often face. On the inspirational plane, the author reaffirms the importance of college teaching in light of criticisms from a variety of sources. These include the reproduction theorists who argue that universities simply mirror the fundamental inequities of capitalist society, to the conservatives whose "apocalyptic analyses of higher education ... hark back to an era of classically derived verities." Finally, on the practical plane, Brookfield analyzes the major demands, dilemmas, and problems of college teaching and provides helpful advice based on over 20 years of experience teaching at the college level.

Although the entire book is informative and engaging, three chapters are particularly noteworthy. The first, Chapter 2, focuses on college teachers themselves and their need for developing personal visions of teaching. According to Brookfield, many college teachers pay lip service to, but fall short of developing, a critical rationale for practice which he defines as "a set of beliefs, values, and convictions about the fundamental forms and practices of teaching." He argues that a critical rationale for practice is important for organizational, political, and pedagogical reasons. Organizationally, a critical rationale provides college teachers with a "navigation instrument" which gives them direction and confidence in an enterprise that is characterized by uncertainty. Politically, it allows college teachers to respond intelligently to bureaucratic pressures that try to force them to adopt and implement inadequate teaching methods, curricula, or evaluation criteria. Pedagogically, it enables college teachers to act as important role models for their students. On this third point, Brookfield argues that if

teaching is grounded in a well-conceived rationale, "students will draw strength from [a teacher's] passion and conviction during times of uncertainty."

The second chapter of particular note, Chapter 4, focuses primarily on the student as learner as it examines the tensions and emotions of learning. Although a variety of topics are covered in this chapter, Brookfield's discussion of emotionality, challenge, and reflection are particularly convincing. On the issue of emotionality, the author argues that, although students often speak emotionally about their learning experiences, the emotional dimensions of learning are rarely addressed in research into the learning process. Moreover, Brookfield maintains that one of the most common emotions experienced by students is "a grieving for lost certainties;" in other words, rather than perceiving the learning process as liberating and exciting, students often perceive it as distressing and disturbing. Brookfield argues that students' expressions of resentment and anger are often the result of being jerked out of their worlds of certainty. He goes on to imply that, rather than being threatened by these student outbursts, college teachers should expect them as a natural "symptom" of the learning process.

Related to the issue of emotionality is the issue of challenge. Brookfield argues that when students are asked to reflect on "significant learning episodes" from their college experiences, the issue of challenge often arises. In other words, some of the most memorable learning experiences are those in which students are challenged to their personal limits. This is what Brookfield means when he states that "the experience of grappling successfully with what was initially threatening is truly empowering."

Finally, on the issue of reflection, Brookfield argues that praxis, or opportunities for the interplay between action and reflection, are important for effective teaching. Unfortunately, as many college teachers might agree, the active component is often emphasized more than the reflective component in spite of most people's best intentions to the contrary. Brookfield argues that the pursuit of breadth over depth often leaves students with the feeling that they never have the opportunity to master new knowledge or skill areas adequately.

The third chapter of particular note, Chapter 12, focuses on both teachers and students and the difficulty in building trust between the two. Brookfield portrays trust as a delicate balancing act between teacher credibility as the ability of teachers to present themselves as people with something of value to offer to students. This is sometimes referred to as the critical competence that students have the right to expect from their teachers. On the other hand, Brookfield describes authenticity as the ability of teachers to present themselves as whole people. In this regard, Brookfield argues that in order to be perceived as authentic, teachers must ensure that their words and actions are congruent, that they

admit to error and fallibility, that they reveal aspects of their lives outside their roles as teachers, and that they listen actively to students' concerns. The challenge in being both credible and authentic is that the actions associated with these ideas are often seen as contradictory; in other words, in pursuing one, teachers often risk threatening the other. In striving to establish their credibility by sharing their knowledge and experience, college teachers risk being perceived as arrogant and authoritarian. In striving to be authentic, they risk weakening their credibility by too willingly admitting to error and too readily divulging aspects of their personal lives.

Although certain chapters of *The Skillful Teacher* suffer somewhat from unnecessary repetition, this is only a minor criticism of a book that I believe should be required reading for teachers not only at the college level but at other levels as well. Having spent 20 years in the classroom, Brookfield has the unique skill of being able to describe the highs and the lows of teaching that is only possible with many years of teaching experience. Nowhere is this talent more evident than early in the book when he compares teaching to white-water rafting:

Periods of calm are interspersed with sudden frenetic turbulence. Boredom alternates with excitement, reflection with action. As we successfully negotiate rapids fraught with danger, we feel a sense of self-confident exhilaration. As we start downstream after capsizing, our self-confidence is shaken and we are awash in self-doubt. All teachers sooner or later capsize, and all teachers worth their salt regularly ask themselves whether or not they are doing the right thing.