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Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

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Stephen Brookfield's famous book *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* was first published in 1995. It earned rave reviews after its initial publication, and several friends recommended it highly to me years ago. The second edition that is being reviewed here saw the light of day in 2017, more than two decades after the first. Between editions, Brookfield's core thesis remains largely unchanged. The critically reflective teacher identifies and scrutinises her assumptions that shape her practice by using the four lenses of critical reflection: (1) students' eyes, (2) colleagues' perspectives, (3) theory and (4) personal experience. Despite the continuity of the core thesis in the second edition, Brookfield has done something rather unusual for a new edition in completely rewriting "the whole book from the opening sentence to the last" (ix). Consequently, there are six completely new chapters – on assumptions of power; hegemony; team teaching; the social media; race and racism; and leadership – that provide us with a useful update on Brookfield's current thinking and also situate the critically reflective teacher firmly in the roller coaster of 21st century teaching.

In case the author still requires an introduction, Stephen Brookfield is a world-famous, multiple award-winning author, co-author and editor of 19 books. He is currently a Professor at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis, Minnesota; prior professorial appointments include Columbia University and Harvard. The intended main audience of the book is Higher Education teachers. However, "ideas and practices in the book have been field-tested with everyone from the Occupy movement to the Marine Corps; the World Bank to mining schools; art, fashion, and theater institutes to oil corporations; hospitals to seminaries; and prisons to parent groups" (x).

The book consists of a Preface, Acknowledgements, a section about the author, 14 chapters as well as an excellent Bibliography and a very detailed Index. After a most useful overview of the contents in the Preface, the book's first chapter addresses the book's title by asking what critically reflective teaching is all about. In the author's words, critical reflection is "the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of

our teaching assumptions" (3). In order to critically reflect on his and others' teaching assumptions, Brookfield's tried and tested approach since the 1990s has been to employ the afore-mentioned four lenses of critical reflection. They also provide the organising structure of a major part of the book (especially chapters 4 - 10). In Brookfield's Critical Theory-influenced perspective, reflection becomes critical by addressing two distinct purposes, illuminating power (chapter 2) and uncovering hegemony (chapter 3).

In chapter 2, we are reminded that educational processes and interactions are framed by wider structures of power and dominant ideology (for instance, capitalism, positivism, democracy, militarism, white supremacy or patriarchy), and the critically reflective teacher is well-advised to question her assumptions constantly. For instance, it is a common sense assumption to reduce lecturing to a minimum in order to foster a more active student participation and critical thinking. However, an alternative interpretation is that a well-delivered lecture may be "a wonderfully stimulating experience" that "can open up exciting new intellectual territory, clarify complex concepts, and challenge students to rethink familiar assumptions" (23), in addition to providing the learners with an introduction to a hitherto unfamiliar subject area. Another common sense assumption of Brookfield was linked to his use of the Circle (with all participants facing each other). Brookfield is a strong believer in the use of autobiographical narrative (something that greatly helps in making his books highly readable and engaging) and discloses that in his very first class ever, some 50 years ago, he arranged seats in a Circle as a physical manifestation of democracy. In the 1980's, however, he read Foucault on power and then realised that rearranging furniture is unfortunately insufficient for rearranging power relations, as power is all-pervasive, also in the classroom.

In chapter 3, the uncovering of hegemonic assumptions is discussed. Hegemony is a difficult concept (which is quite masterfully discussed also in Brookfield's book *The power of Critical Theory for adult learning and teaching*). Brookfield defines hegemony as "the process by which an existing order secures the consent of people to the legitimacy of that order, even when it disadvantages them greatly" (39).

Immediately, some political events that occurred in 2016 (a certain vote in Brookfield's home country, and a certain presidential election in Brookfield's country of choice) may spring to mind, depending on one's political persuasion. In the realm of learning and teaching, hegemonic assumptions are believed to be common sense truths and perceived to be in teachers' best interests. But in actual fact, they are harmful. Brookfield offers a plethora of insightful examples, but one must suffice here. If a teacher measures her success by how well she creates motivated students, such an erroneous, monocausal focus on student motivation as a result of a teacher's charismatic singularity may well lead to demoralising failure, as it forgets the "need to fund education properly, reduce class sizes, provide proper infrastructure, and support staff development" (44). Elsewhere in the book, Brookfield recommends avoiding "self-laceration" (86) – blaming oneself when students are not learning – for similar reasons.

Another highlight of the third chapter is when Brookfield discusses the "Pearsonisation" of Higher Ed (with apologies to my friends from Pearson). In this context, a prime example is the uni-dimensionality of student evaluation-of-teaching (SET) forms where epistemologically-challenged administrators reduce the complexities of teaching to a linear, quantifiable rating system. Brookfield cautions that "[e]quating good teaching with how many students feel you have done what they wanted is a dead end that prevents significant learning" (56). While SET forms purportedly measure teaching effectiveness, all they do is measure what students say – which may not be precisely the same thing. When statistics are calculated and numbers are reported, this is oftentimes conveniently forgotten.

The following chapters focus on the author's four lenses of critical reflection. In the fourth chapter, Brookfield argues against mandating and assessing reflective practice, as reflection could easily be instrumentalised via a reductionist checklist. To Brookfield, the incorporation of the lexicon of critical reflection into various forms of professional evaluation is "often self-defeating" (258). I was similarly intrigued that Brookfield observed "*a mandatory confessional tone* to much of what passes for reflective practice" (76; emphasis added). In the fifth chapter, the author clarifies the many benefits of critical reflection, and as the students' eyes are the most important lens of critical reflection in his experience, his in-depth discussion of the critical lenses starts with that in chapter 6.

Chapter 6 discusses some excellent research techniques how we as teachers can actually get into students' heads in a timely fashion, such as the One-Minute Paper, the Muddiest Point, the Learning Audit, clickers, social media, TodaysMeet and the Letter to Successors. A more detailed discussion is reserved for the Critical Incident Questionnaire that Brookfield still uses himself every week when he teaches. Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the second lens, colleagues' perceptions, and again, recommend useful techniques that are meant to help avoid jumping to premature conclusions, and which could be used within faculty-learning communities (FLCs). Team teaching is explored as a particularly useful form of employing the colleagues' lens.

The third lens of critical reflection, using personal experience, is the topic of chapter 9. Importantly, Brookfield reminds us that we as teachers usually are in love with the subjects we teach and thus find it difficult to imagine students finding them boring or intimidating. Brookfield, once again, uses autobiographical disclosure, specifically how he learned how to swim as a middle-aged man, to bring home this point. Having a preference for self-directed learning, Brookfield initially preferred learning how to swim by observing others swim. After failing miserably to learn how to swim that way, Brookfield reluctantly signed up for a class for adult non-swimmers. Unhappy with the teaching method of the very young instructor that he sarcastically describes as "charismatic demonstration" (164), he did not make much progress in learning the skill, also because he was fearful of putting his head in water and because the instructor was insisting on using the crawl stroke. The breakthrough came when a peer suggested he should use goggles. When Brookfield, somewhat unintentionally, swam a whole lap, he felt "a startling jolt of pride, an unalloyed rush of happiness" (167). What do we learn from this? Personal experience is extremely important for the development of our identity as teachers, and "the best teachers are probably those who've achieved their skill mastery, knowledge, and intellectual fluidity only after periods of struggle and anxiety" (165).

The final lens of critical reflection is theory (chapter 10). As an example, Brookfield shares how reflecting on research in very varied fields (brain science; digital storytelling; Csikszentmihalyi's flow; and playfulness) made him incorporate more artistic elements into his teaching. Also, he cites a beautiful quotation by one of his heroes, Paolo Freire:

"when I meet some books – I say 'meet' because some books are like persons – when I meet some books, I remake my practice theoretically, I become better able to understand the theory inside of my action" (cited in 179).

Chapter 11 is about incorporating social media and back-channel communication into teaching in a physical classroom. Brookfield refers to himself tongue-in-cheek as "a technophobe and Luddite" (192), but as an impressive example of critical self-reflection, he eventually realised that social media (such as Twitter, Poll Everywhere, Socrative, TodaysMeet and Backchannel Chat) provide two critically-reflective lenses: students' eyes and colleagues' perceptions (in addition, the Internet provides access to previously-difficult-to-access theory, a third critically-reflective lens). A live social media feed offers participants the opportunity for anonymity, with honesty more likely to occur, and further advantages being inclusivity and immediacy.

The 12th chapter is about a topic that has become a focus of Brookfield's work in recent years (Brookfield et al., 2019), applying critical reflection to teaching race and racism. Chapter 13 is about negotiating the risks of critical reflection. If only critically-reflected teaching would be as straightforward as reviewing one's autobiography, researching one's students, talking to one's colleagues and reading "some provocative theoretical literature, and then everything will fall into place" (225)! To Brookfield, becoming a critically-reflective teacher is clearly a lifelong learning process. He provides useful

advice how to deal with the self-perception of impostorship, and how to avoid committing 'cultural suicide' (unknowingly alienating peers) as well as 'political marginalisation'. The final chapter is about practicing critically reflective leadership or "learning leadership" (247) – to quote the title of another Brookfield book (co-authored with Preskill), *Learning as a way of leading*.

What are my sentiments towards this book? I think this is a book that is of critical – pun intended – importance, and I would certainly highly recommend it to everybody in the teaching profession, including novices as well as 'old hands'. I have no doubt that if some of Brookfield's practices were more widely applied by other teachers in Higher and Adult Education, the world would stand a chance to become a better place. Brookfield's book under review could be regarded as a starting point to further explore his oeuvre of a current total of 19 books (not counting journal articles).

While the book is indubitably critically important (and ranks extremely highly in my personal list of modern educational classics, together with works such as Biggs and Tang's *Teaching for quality learning at university* and not too many others), it naturally fails to completely 'spark joy' (to use anti-clutter guru Mari Kondo's phrase). To some extent, it may create an experience akin to the choice *The Matrix's* Neo makes, where not reading the book is the blue pill, connoting blissful ignorance and preserving an illusory world-view, and reading the book is the red pill, providing us with harsh knowledge about pedagogic reality. Brookfield's masterpiece cuts like a sharp sword through the fog shrouding our pedagogic life-world, but, depending on the temperament of the reader, could be a bitter pill to swallow. For me, reflecting on the book made me feel more of an imposter than I usually do – here, Brookfield writes about his masterful and carefully considered practice; there, I only use a small fraction of all the wonderful things that he has been doing in the classroom. But if, like me, you should feel overwhelmed by some of the masterful techniques that Brookfield employs, do not be overly worried, as Brookfield himself comes to the rescue. Brookfield himself, for most of his teaching life, felt like an "impostor" (hard to believe, but true) and has come to embrace such a self-perception:

"So we should never lose the sense that we're impostors struggling in the dark, trying to draw meaning from contradictory and often opaque experiences. To feel this is to open permanent possibilities for change and development in our practice" (231).

Brookfield writes beautiful prose and has a knack for exploring complex matters in simple ways, without oversimplifying. He also seems to be an incredibly nice and humble person, despite his many massive achievements. The reflective humility shines through his book and after fifty years of teaching, he still perceives himself as forever *becoming* a critically reflective teacher. The "boy from Bootle" (138) – in Liverpool – has come a long way, and I give you my highest recommendation to 'meet' this and other of Brookfield's fabulous books on your own, lifelong journey of becoming.

## References

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