Teaching, Learning, Assessing: A Guide for Effective Teaching at College and University

Kara Smith (Ed.). Oakville, Ontario, Canada: Mosaic Press, 2007, pp. v + 189. ISBN 0-88962-866-1.

Approach matters. I read *Teaching, Learning, Assessing* front to back, page by page, chapter by chapter. With the intent of writing a review, I sought out the unique contribution of each author as well as the overall themes that defined the work as a whole. This “front to back” approach might also work for the beginning college or university professor or the instructor looking for a weekend refresher on teaching at the post-secondary level. On the other hand, for the novice and even experienced professor seeking inspiration for particular aspects of the in-class teaching and learning process, it might be more appropriate to select a particular section (1. Before We Teach; 2. How We Teach; 3. How We Assess; 4. After We Assess) or individual chapters (18 in all) from which might be gleaned broad theoretical foundations, overarching methodologies, or particular practical applications. In this regard, a teacher looking to become more proficient in, say, syllabus construction, student engagement, mentoring, assessment, or responding to pressures of the academy outside the classroom, will benefit from a careful perusal of the comprehensive Table of Contents which provides six and a half pages of detailed information regarding section, chapter, and topic locations within the book. For example, Egbo’s chapter (Teaching for Inclusion in University Classrooms) is organized into “Pre-Instructional Activities,” “Instructional Activities,” “Post-Instructional Activities,” and “Other Practical Inclusive Strategies,” and is further subdivided into an additional seven sections.

A note of caution, though, to the reader who approaches this work on a piecemeal basis: It is generally acknowledged that teachers are attracted to resource and methodological “fads and frills” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004) unless they have articulated their beliefs, attitudes, and values in relation to key educational concepts. If one follows the “selected readings” approach, picking out various “to do” lists or procedural frameworks, it might seem that “fads and frills” is the modus operandi of *Teaching, Learning, Assessing*. It might even appear that the contributing authors have merely furnished a “shopping list” of theory and practice exclusive of any particular “teaching and learning” theoretical framework. It is, therefore, crucial for the reader to recognize that this collection is supported by a particular approach to teaching and learning, which in its variegated strains brings full focus to the involvement of the student in the learning process. This overarching constructivist theoretical framework is articulated in Smith’s brief introduction, a reading of which would enhance any approach to this book. In a manner consistent with Frank Smith’s (1998) “classic theory of learning,” engagement, interaction, and transformation are the deeply embedded values in the work.

From within this pedagogical framework, Smith indicates that the intent of this collection is to encourage a student-centred, constructivist approach to the teaching/learning process. This context is not forced on the reader as an explicit set of instructions on how to teach. Instead, as Smith suggests in her introduction,

it might be best understood as a collection of “generative heuristics” (p. iii). “New faculty are encouraged to taste the sampling of teaching within, begin to create their own personal teaching style, and read further into those teaching areas which are of most interest” (p. iii).

It might be somewhat surprising, or even appear contrived, to encounter a collection of university professors who appear to share so much in common concerning a particular (constructivist) approach to learning: It is, therefore, reassuring to find practical “theory-in-use” applications that are obviously borne of many years of post-secondary “real-life” teaching experience in support of this “espoused theory” (Argyris & Schon, 1978). The contributors usually opt for the unpacking of theory into its practical application when there is a choice to be made between expounding on theory or practice. For example, while discussing making the large class smaller, Morton chooses to “shar[e] my activities rather than the fundamentals or the theoretical explanations” (p. 117) after identifying the “theoretical” literature. This is not a collection of idealized or envisioned approaches, but instead the reporting of what works and why.

As noted above, the book is organized along an easy to follow “Before We Teach”, “How We Teach”, and “How We Assess/After We Assess” format. Within the first section, contextual issues such as the prior knowledge of the student are considered (Smith, Oakley), along with the first time preparation of a course outline (Tobin). Egbo and Shantz write about issues of inclusion and creation of a positive learning culture and climate in the university classroom.

In the second section, the focus shifts to teaching methodologies and practices that foster inquiry and engagement, including how to begin classes (Starr, Laing, Glassford, and Crawford). Lee, Salinitri, and Tousignant address topics such as the value of everyday experiences in learning, benefits of mentorships, and the online learning environment. In particular, Salinitri reports on her research concerning the benefit to “at risk” beginning post-secondary students of mentorship triads in a manner which would allow the adaptation of such a program to many local sites of teaching and learning. Morton provides a comprehensive overview of large class engagement techniques and, similar to Salinitri, provides new findings based on his own action research that informs these practices. Hurley takes the reader into the responsibilities of both the graduate student and professor when entering into the graduate studies advising relationship.

The last section of the book addresses assessment issues and techniques (Ableser), including the controversy that tends to characterize discussions concerning various views of the purposes of assessment (Clovis). University and college teachers are invited to use assessment techniques that facilitate learning, as opposed to merely generating data that can be used for comparison and competition among students. Appropriately, Smith concludes by bringing the university teacher’s attention back to the value (and necessity) of disseminating research findings through the publication of peer-reviewed journal articles. She provides useful tips and highlights several lists of journals and book publishers.

The “linear” reader will discover that there are some overlaps amongst the chapters. The consistency of material evident within these overlaps (Glassford and Starr, Glassford and Egbo, Egbo and Starr, etc) both validate significant

points and allow these chapters to stand alone as well grounded, comprehensive discussions of the subject at hand.

Conclusion

Teaching, Learning, Assessing stands out for its focus on the scholarship of teaching (Boyer, 1990) and learning (Smith, 1998). Editor Smith and her contributors leave no doubt regarding the importance of this responsibility of the professoriate, regardless of career stage. By emphasizing the importance of post-secondary institutional support for the publication of articles related to the scholarship of teaching, Smith encourages, in a broad sense, a renewed institutional commitment to the “scholarship of teaching” and in a very specific sense the granting of formal credit for “innovative, engaging, and transformative” teaching. I believe that the reader will find this collection to be a case in point of this dictum.

Argyris, C., & Schon, D. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Don Mill, ON: Addison-Wesley.

Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Ornstein, A., & Hunkins, F. (2004). *Curriculum foundations, principles, and issues* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Smith, F. (1998). *The book of learning and forgetting*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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