H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Katherine J. Mayberry, ed. *Teaching What You're Not: Identity Politics in Higher Education*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. ix + 371 pp. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-5547-1; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5531-0.

Reviewed by Helen M. Lanthier (Trinity College of Vermont) Published on H-Review (December, 1997)

Katherine Mayberry, a Professor of Language and Literature at Rochester Institute of Technology, College of Liberal Arts, has given readers a timely and perhaps long-overdue series of accounts of what it means to teach about things which are not within the realm of the personal experience of those called "teacher". While certainly accessible to the lay person, the essays collected here speak most forcefully to educators. It is a book that demands the focused attention of all higher education faculty if we are to truly begin to understand the life experiences of our students and colleagues.

The individuals upon whom Mayberry has called to reflect on what it means to "teach what they are not" are by no means cowardly about such reflective practice. To her credit, the essayists are representative of a variety of opinions; Mayberry has not shied away from controversy here but rather has invited it, perhaps as a result of her own realization that there is no "right" answer but that there are certainly many questions that must be pondered. In the end, we may only have a better question.

In the first chapter, Mayberry provides an overview of the challenge and a brief synopsis of each of the essays that follow. Noting that "the opening of the university to minority groups clearly set the stage for the phenomenon of identity politics" (p.2), Mayberry explores the evolution of the collective consciousness of higher education faculty, beginning with a time not too long ago when it was politically easy to speak about and for anyone and everyone, concluding with the present, described by Mayberry as a time during which calls for papers on the topic of identity politics are responded to in one of two ways. She writes, "Most interesting (and troubling), the disagreements took the form of published letters to the *Chronical*; the agreements (and there were many over a period of six weeks or so) were communicated to me privately by telephone and letter" (p. 19).

She concludes, "One hopes that this striking segregation of response is not evident of how effectively a still hierarchical academic system can silence minority views, of how important identity politics finally are" (p. 19).

The range of topics addressed here are wide in variety, providing readers with ample room to find a topic that is close to what they do in their own lives as professional educators. There is something for everyone and, in this reviewer's opinion, everyone should read at least two or three of the essays. Reading through the book as a whole, I found myself being asked to think about those who teach about minority cultures while their own background is of the majority; about those who teach lesbian/gay studies while they are heterosexual; about those who teach women's studies while they are male; and even about myself as one who teaches about individuals with societally-labeled disabilities though I am one who has escaped such labels.

I had much cause to seriously consider what I do, why I do it, if I should do it, and the potential impact of my "doings" on the learners within the learning community I strive to create. Through a careful and considered reading of this anthology, I came to a point where I could more easily describe the learning challenges I present to my students and that they present to me. I began to think of my students as "learning partners," giving to and taking from them a shared responsibility for teaching and learning. The experiences I have had are mine, but they are limited. Together, our experiential background is much wider. Together, we can learn to build bridges. Together, we can knock down the invisible walls that maintain an "us" and a "them".

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