

H-Net Reviews

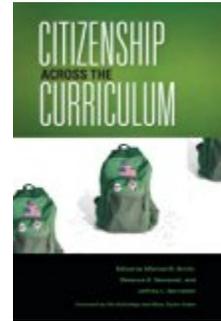
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael B. Smith, Rebecca S. Nowacek, Jeffrey Bernstein, eds. *Citizenship across the Curriculum*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xvii + 219 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35448-8; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22179-7.

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Engaging Learners, Fostering Citizenship

In his influential book *The Courage to Teach* (1997), Parker Palmer laments the “privatization” of teaching, arguing that the pervasive tendency to teach behind closed doors stifles reform. “If surgery and the law were practiced as privately as teaching,” he writes, “we would still treat most patients with leeches and dunk defendants in millponds.”[1] In *Citizenship Across the Curriculum*, eight post-secondary teachers from diverse institutions including community colleges, small, faith-based, and secular liberal arts colleges, and large state universities break the silence on their own teaching practices and make a valuable contribution to public discourse on teaching and learning.

The authors come from an array of disciplines, spanning the humanities, social and physical sciences, and professional studies. They first connected during their year as Carnegie Scholars of Teaching, which included three residential periods designed to foster discussion and collaboration around issues related to teaching in higher education. These authors found they had a common interest in incorporating attention to citizenship in their courses and undertook to produce this book to explore how each enacts this interest in their own teaching. The book consists of an introduction, setting out the project goals, eight chapters centered on describing, in detail, each scholar’s attempts to include citizenship themes in his or her course, and two concluding chapters, written by critical friends, designed to synthesize and extend the ideas developed in the descriptive chap-

ters.

While citizenship is front and center in the title of the book and is a common theme running through all chapters, I concur with Edward Ziotkowski, one of the critical friends mentioned above, who contends the book is as much about university teaching as it is about citizenship. He writes, “even if one were not personally concerned with ‘citizenship’ and preparation for citizenship as items that should be on the academic agenda, one could still learn so much from these chapters that one might recommend them simply because of what they have to say about good teaching and deep learning” (p. 200). While there is great diversity in the range of disciplines taught, the specific pedagogical initiatives employed, and the institutional context for teaching, a number of common ideas about what makes for good teaching permeate the anthology.

First and foremost, good teaching is nurtured in public discourse. As Palmer says, “The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it.”[2] These scholars are united in their commitment to improving their craft and unflinchingly honest in tracing their evolution as teachers. Chemistry professor Matthew Fisher describes the rhetorical commitment to good teaching in his own academic society, and the pervasive failure to live up to that commitment in the field. He writes compellingly about his “personal journey to breaking the silence” and open-

ing his own teaching to scrutiny (p. 115).

Historian Michael B. Smith points out the curious dichotomy that sees academics subject their scholarly work to rigorous peer review but keep their questions and conclusions about teaching and learning private. That dichotomy is broken down here as each of the descriptive chapters traces, in detail, the author's attempts to engage students in meaningful learning experiences. In almost every chapter, the instructor has systematically collected data about student performance and used that not only to assess student progress but also to prompt deep reflection on his or her effectiveness as a teacher. In analyzing her students' performance in the context of a group assignment, for example, Rebecca Nowacek comes to the conclusion that they eschewed the hard work of negotiating disagreement in favor of "relatively little extended interaction and a decided avoidance of conflict" (p. 100). Nowacek finds this unsatisfactory, believing it is her job—the job of all university teachers—to provide "practice and coaching in the art of principled and civil disagreement" (p. 101). This prompts her to reflect on what she might do in the next iteration of the course to better meet this goal.

Second, these teachers demonstrate a commitment to teaching that is transformational—that concerns itself not only with what students know and can do but who they are. Mathematician Michael Burke engages students in the use of mathematical data and models to inform public debates about the merits of nuclear power. He is not only concerned that they learn calculus but also that they become civic agents committed to using evidence to inform and enhance debate. "I want," he writes, "to literally change the way in which our students think" (p. 143). Similarly, Howard Tinberg sees the transformational possibilities of engaging his students in the study of the *Shoah* (Holocaust). His goal is to see each student develop a "moral and ethical identity as a world citizen, with an obligation to end bigotry and oppression wherever they may occur" (p. 74).

In one of the synthesis chapters, David Scobey argues that this book was "prompted by two intersecting urgencies: mounting disquiet over the devolution of civic life and mounting disquiet over the failures of higher education" (p. 189). One of the perceived failures of higher education has been its move away from a concern with public virtue toward more individualistic and functional goals. The authors of this book issue a stirring and well-argued challenge to rethink that direction. For these writers, education is not only about equipping students

with knowledge and skills; it is also about forming them as people.

Extending from this concern to foster civic virtue in students is a recognition that education should be, even in its private manifestations, a public enterprise. It seems to me that the debates that roar in education around private investment in schools often focus on the wrong questions. They almost exclusively center on issues of who pays or who is served and not on the question of what education is for. Many of these authors teach at private institutions, but all advocate public purposes for the education they provide. In virtually every case, they write about course requirements that engage their students in civic life. From the political science professor who developed simulations designed to foster informed, skilful, and collaborative engagement with the political system to the chemistry professor involving students in considering the public health implications of science policy and practice, all are concerned with providing an education that pushes students toward meaningful public engagement. The two authors who teach at Roman Catholic institutions make the point that this commitment to public service is completely consistent with—in fact, flows directly from—their institutions' historic and contemporary sense of mission. Those of us who teach at public institutions would do well to consider whether our commitment to the public purposes of higher education is as consistent and strong.

Finally, for these scholars, good teaching is necessarily relational. The cliché, "We teach students, not subjects," is often bandied about in K-12 education to remind teachers where their focus should be. In higher education, there is even more concentration on developing disciplinary expertise, and a greater tendency to regard students as passive recipients of that expertise. All of the writers here work very hard to achieve the appropriate balance between concern for students and faithfulness to their disciplines. They are, to twist the cliché a bit, focused on teaching their students the important concepts and skills of their disciplines. They recognize that to do so they must first know who the students are; what knowledge and attitudes they bring with them to the learning situation; and how they might be linked to meaningful ways to work out their growing knowledge and skills in addressing social issues and problems.

Communications teacher Carmen Werder, for example, asked the students at the beginning of her course to think of metaphors to describe themselves as both learners and communicators. She found that overwhelmingly

they describe themselves in passive terms bereft of either engagement or a sense of agency. She used that knowledge to tailor experiences designed to involve students in wrestling with important problems and to foster the sense that they could act in meaningful ways to solve them. All of these authors develop formal and informal mechanisms to get to know their students as learners and use this information to improve the effectiveness of their teaching.

While this book is an excellent contribution to the scholarly work on teaching and learning in higher education, it does have some irritating weaknesses. A key one of these is the looseness around defining what is meant by citizenship. In the introduction, the editors make the point that they find “the conventional definitions of what constitutes an engaged citizen important but insufficient,” and argue that their conceptions “encompass both the political and the personal” dimensions of citizenship (p. 5). This is all well and good, but feminist scholars of citizenship, among others, have been pushing this very point for years.[3] In fact, I would argue, the conceptions of citizenship outlined in these chapters fit very nicely into civic, republican orientations that hold the twin themes of obligation and agency to be central to the civic enterprise. This book fits very well with approaches to citizenship outlined by scholars such as Benjamin Barber, Robert Bellah, and Robert Putnam, and its discussion of citizenship would have been much stronger had these been acknowledged.

There is a similar lack of contextualization in terms of learning theory. There is significant, scholarly work in education around key themes explored in this book, such as active learning, paying attention to the cognitive frames of students, and the culturally embedded nature of learning. In extolling the virtues of simulations, community engagement, metacognitive reflection, and the creation of cognitive dissonance, the authors are treading

on ground that has been well covered by researchers in education, but there is only passing acknowledgement of this.[4] These particular writers, and those engaged in the broader field of inquiry in teaching and learning in higher education, would do well to pay attention to that work as it would help to situate and extend the reach of their own contributions.

While these concerns are important, they ought not to detract from the considerable contribution this book offers to those interested in improving teaching in higher education. Perhaps the best compliment I can pay is to acknowledge that I have circulated one of the chapters to some of my own colleagues as a possible model for developing a capstone course for one of our faculty’s programs. I have received a number of positive responses, and the piece is to be discussed at our faculty’s next meeting. It strikes me that this is exactly the kind of process these authors would want to foster.

Notes

[1]. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 144.

[2]. Ibid.

[3]. For example, Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) and Madeleine Arnot and Jo-Anne Dillabough, *Challenging Democracy: International Perspectives on Gender, Education and Citizenship* (London: Routledge / Falmer, 2000).

[4]. For example, Howard Gardner, *The Development and Education of the Mind: The Selected Works of Howard Gardner*, World Library of Educationalists Series (New York: Routledge, 2006) and Judith Ireson, *Learners, Learning and Educational Activity* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

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