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 chapters.

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-
writers, education is not only about equipping students

Historian Michael B. Smith points out the curious di-

tchotomy that sees academics subject their scholarly work
to rigorous peer review but keep their questions and conclu-
sions about teaching and learning private. That di-

tchotomy 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 reflec-
tion on his or her effectiveness as a teacher. In analyzing
her students’ performance in the context of a group as-

signment, for example, Rebecca Nowacek comes to the
conclusion that they eschewed the hard work of negoti-
ating 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 pub-
lc 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 in-
form and enhance debate. “I want,” he writes, “to liter-
ally change the way in which our students think” (p. 143).
Similarly, Howard Tinberg sees the transforma-
tional 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 where-
ever they may occur” (p. 74).

In one of the synthesis chapters, David Scobey argues
that this book was “prompted by two intersecting urgen-
cies: mounting disquiet over the devolution of civic life
and mounting disquiet over the failures of higher edu-
cation” (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 stu-
dents 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 pol-
icy and practice, all are concerned with providing an edu-
cation that pushes students toward meaningful public en-
gagement. The two authors who teach at Roman Catholic
institutions make the point that this commitment to pub-
lic service is completely consistent with—in fact, flows di-
rectly from—their institutions’ historic and contemporary
sense of mission. Those of us who teach at public institu-
tions 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 necessar-
ily relational. The cliché, “We teach students, not sub-
jects,” is often bandied about in K-12 education to remind
teachers where their focus should be. In higher educa-
tion, there is even more concentration on developing dis-
ciplinary expertise, and a greater tendency to regard stu-
dents 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, fo-
cused 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 knowl-
edge 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 exam-
ple, asked the students at the beginning of her course to
think of metaphors to describe themselves as both learn-
ers 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


[2]. Ibid.
