



Faculty Identities and the Challenge of Diversity: Reflections on Teaching in Higher Education

Chester, Mark; and Young, Jr., Alford A., eds.
Paradigm Publishers, 2013

Book Review

Tags: diversifying the faculty | faculty diversity | faculty identity | faculty of color | faculty well-being

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This book is dedicated to a full-orbed challenge to discrimination - and promotion of multiculturalism - in higher education, from the classroom to “changes in the cultures, structures, and policies of the institution” (194). It will benefit faculty and administrators seeking to better understand, promote, and implement solutions regarding various diversities in university contexts. While Christian educators may question certain philosophical and religious presuppositions being advocated, many descriptive, reflective, and practical insights can be critically embraced for pedagogy and classroom, course development, broader curricular intentions, and governing cultures and mechanisms.

Perhaps centrally beneficial to faculty are the narratives of diverse women and men faculty - white and of color, representing both natural science and social science disciplines - responding to a face-to-face interview protocol of open-ended and broad questions: queries seeking responses to eight topical areas primarily focused on teaching and diversity, race and gendered experiences, general diversity issues in higher education, and agential roles in supporting or bringing change involving diversity and multiculturalism (26-28).

This work’s broad purpose is to explore how university faculty members of various races, ethnicities, and genders - awarded for undergraduate teaching effectiveness in diverse classroom environments - engage demands and expectations from students, from higher education as a social institution, and from themselves, in racially and ethnically diverse classrooms: especially toward improving the teaching-learning process (viii-ix).

The book comprises four parts: background and context, difference and diversity in classroom

interactions, identity role examination, and larger contexts and change. Each part contains three chapters. References are extensive and effectively utilized and the index is well-designed.

The opening chapter argues that white male dominance in university settings significantly affects white women and faculty of color, as well as students, especially of non-majority groups. Negatively, this includes exclusion and discrimination via traditions that focus on individualistic value orientation and norms that “diminish the importance of teamwork and skills in interactions among the faculty,” leading to a sense of isolation and lack of community (3). In the classroom the individual achievement emphasis, combined with presumed universalistic norms related to tests or criteria as indicators of merit, entail pedagogical approaches that minimize students’ cultural and socioeconomic identities, backgrounds, and relationships, undermining collaborative learning. Nevertheless, all faculty are responsible for personal and organizational change, whether white faculty especially using their authority to adopt practices that challenge the commonplace habitus, or underrepresented faculty utilizing the margin for building communities of marginalized faculty and links to communities and groups outside academia (19).

Chapter 2 outlines the project/study design and purpose, “to explore the ways in which faculty members’ social identities impact their experience in the university, especially but not solely in the classroom” (21), while Chapter 3 describes and elaborates “five major constitutive elements of conflict in the educational setting” – the instructor, the student, the pedagogical approach, the classroom space, and the course material – that help readers decipher “how varied forms of conflict emerge given the different ways in which these elements converge” (39). Each element is expounded in later chapters.

It seems appropriate to conclude this review with a primary thesis of the book: “ultimately, whatever the causes of perceived challenges to authority and expertise, the key pedagogical dilemma for faculty is to work at ensuring and preserving the authority that has a place in relationships with students while also maintaining an inquiring, empowering, and vibrant educational climate” (63).

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