

Paths to Learning: Teaching for Engagement in College

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Paths to Learning: Teaching for Engagement in College, authored by Barbara F. Tobolowsky, was published by The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Tobolowsky, an assistant professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington, previously served as associate director for the Center and credits John Gardner, former Center director, as inspiration for the text. According to the editor, the purpose of this book is to “condense the current research on teaching and learning and provide a range of pedagogical approaches based on theory” (p. 158). The text comprises ten chapters, two of which were authored by the editor.

Chapter 1 is an introduction by the editor. Tobolowsky begins by sharing the impetus for this text and explaining why this volume is important for faculty today. She provides a brief historical accounting of pedagogical changes (dating back to the Greeks) and states her purpose is to provide an overview of the pedagogical options available to today’s faculty. An overview of themes addressed in each chapter is provided, as well as a guiding format: relevant theories linked to classroom applications.

Chapter 2, by Jillian Kinzie, summarizes theories and practices that result in student learning, introducing learning from a neuroscience perspective and discussing effective approaches to quality undergraduate education from institutional and instructional perspectives. Special

attention is given to *The Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; 1991) and the research to support each strategy: student-faculty interaction, cooperative learning, active learning, prompt and meaningful feedback, time-on-task, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and methods of learning. The author also addresses other research-based instructional practices, as well as methods to foster student engagement and learner-centered environments. The chapter closes with a call for educators to improve their instruction by implementing these research-based strategies.

Chapter 3 provides a brief overview of learning theories from a historical perspective. Authors James E. Groccia, Stacey C. Nickson, Chenzi Wang, and Heather Hardin describe six foundational learning theories, highlighting the work of key scholars: Behaviorism (John B. Watson, Edward Lee Thorndike, Ivan Pavlov, and B. F. Skinner), Cognitivism (Jean Piaget and Albert Bandura), Constructivism (Lev Vygotsky), Humanism (Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow), Transformative Learning (Jack Mezirow, Robert Boyd, Paolo Freire, and Edward Taylor), and Andragogy (Malcolm Knowles). Embedded in the discussion of each theory are specific applications to educational settings and suggestions for instructional practice.

Chapter 4, by Nana Osei-Kofi, delves into critical pedagogy and its application in the college classroom, discussing its complex historical origins and sharing various critiques. The author highlights dialogue as a central component of the learning experience and asserts that “all students, as a result of their varied lived experiences, have something meaningful to contribute” (p. 52). Research related to applying critical pedagogy in the classroom is also explored, acknowledging that much of the existent research focuses on theory rather than practice. Three examples of how collegiate instructors have incorporated critical pedagogy into their courses (an ethnobotany course, a language foundations course, and a first-year seminar) are also included. The chapter closes with a moral appeal for adopting critical pedagogy in light of the current political context.

Chapter 5 addresses contemplative pedagogy in the diverse classroom with a focus on promoting social justice. Authors Laura I. Rendón and Vijay Kanagala explain that contemplative pedagogy is focused on when the “social, emotional, and spiritual development, together with academic achievement, are intertwined (indeed, become interdependent) to engage the full complexity of the learner’s cognitive and intuitive skills” (p. 62). A brief historical overview of contemplative and holistic education approaches is provided, including a discussion of the Tree of Contemplative Practices, and the importance of these practices in the culturally diverse classroom. The authors provide three examples of social justice issues addressed through contemplative pedagogical practices, including poetry, cultural autobiography, community service learning, storytelling, photos, and music. Attention is also given to the types of faculty preparation necessary to engage in teaching and learning for diversity and social justice.

Chapter 6 explores strength-oriented teaching as strategy for engaging students. According to the author, Laurie A. Schreiner, “a strengths-oriented approach initially focuses on the talents the students already have, and then teaches them to build on those talents to address areas of challenge” (p. 78). The chapter begins with a brief discussion of engaged learning and the role of motivation in academic success. Next, an overview of the literature related to strength development is shared, including perspectives from positive psychology, business, and higher education. Descriptions of six different strengths-oriented teaching strategies are shared and the chapter closes with a list of online strength-based assessments and related resources.

Chapter 7 explores interactive group learning, defined as, “an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches, including collaborative and cooperative learning, involving joint intellectual effort by students in groups of two or more, or students and teachers together” (p. 107). Authors James E. Groccia, Emad A. Ismail, and S. Raj Chaudhury begin with a brief description of the student benefits associated with interactive group learning and an overview of the history and theoretical origins of this approach, as well as its defining characteristics. They

continue by identifying design methods that can increase the efficacy of this approach. Group size, duration, and task complexity are identified as moderating factors and several common interactive learning strategies are described, including problem-based learning, case-based learning, team-based learning, jigsaw, and think-pair-share.

Engaging students online is the subject of Chapter 8, written by Amy Collier. The chapter begins with a discussion of active learning, evidence supporting this practice, and the challenges in promoting active learning online. Using Moore's (1989) framework of online interaction (learner-content engagement, learner-instructor engagement, learner-learner engagement), the author explores strategies for engaging students in active learning online and provides examples of instructors from various institutions applying these methods (inquiry learning, concept maps, simulations and games, video feedback, synchronous meetings, peer review, social curation, and networking). The chapter also addresses tools and approaches for online learning (e.g. flipped classes). To close, the author provides a listing of online resources, including concept mapping tools, open courseware, online platforms, online resource publications, screencasting software, and synchronous communication tools.

Chapter 9, by Wendy G. Troxel, focuses on effective assessments of learning. She begins with an explanation of learning and developmental outcomes, followed by a discussion of formative and summative assessments with an emphasis on the importance of direct measures. Sample formative assessment techniques tied to pedagogical approaches discussed in previous chapters are provided, and portfolios are introduced as a means to assess overall learning. Rubrics are also included as a meaningful assessment tool, and tips for creating simple rubrics, as well as sample rubrics, are provided. Other assessment methods are addressed (including pre- and post-tests and letter grading), and the chapter concludes by summarizing key components of effective assessment.

The summary chapter, also authored by Tobolowsky, highlights salient points from previous chapters and draws explicit links between the pedagogies discussed and their classroom applications (face-to-face or virtual). Tobolowsky closes by reiterating the purpose of the book is to

provide faculty with the “inspiration and information” (p. 158) to design learning experiences that better support the increasingly diverse student population.

As a professional resource, I did find this book to be inspiring and informative. So much so, that even before completing it, I reached out to several colleagues to form a book club in an upcoming semester with the purpose of discussing the text and reflecting on our own pedagogical decisions. Unlike many of my collegiate colleagues, I had exposure to research and theories on teaching and learning as a part of my formal training, but even so, critical and contemplative pedagogy and strengths-based instruction were not emphasized in my coursework. I found the chapters on these topics meaningful, and I believe all faculty members, particularly those teaching first-year experience courses would benefit from an introduction to, or refresher on, these concepts.

As a former orientation facilitator and coordinator, I believe this text has merit. While the text may be not be well suited for undergraduate student orientation leaders, administrators and graduate students would certainly see the benefits both conceptually and in practice. Orientation design and delivery could benefit from these instructional approaches (in-person and online).

One limitation of the text is that all of the examples provided originate from four-year institutions. With a mission-driven focus on teaching and a historically diverse student body, it stands to reason that community college faculty members could also provide illustrations of how to best put theory into practice. Nonetheless, I highly recommend this text. I look forward to sharing it with colleagues and putting these ideas into action.

References

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