

Teachin' It!: Breakout Moves That Break Down Barriers for Community College Students

reviewed by Kimberley Gomez - March 10, 2020

Title: Teachin' It!: Breakout Moves That Break Down Barriers for Community College Students

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Community colleges have a tough time organizationally and in terms of public perception. In general, the public isn't quite sure what community colleges do, who they serve, or how they offer value. As Eddy (2019) noted, reflecting on the findings of her recent Community College Leadership survey, community colleges have felt the pressure to do it all: serve returning and just-out-of-high school students, build technical skills, offer training certificates, and also prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions. Many of their faculty members are adjuncts, laboring without benefits, often teaching in multiple places to cobble together a decent salary. Those faculty who are full-time are subject to the ever-evolving expectations of state legislators and local city and county administrators, as well as their college administrators. For community college faculty members, opportunities to discuss and compare successful pedagogical skills are few and far between. All of this against the backdrop of their own special mandate of do-more-with-less and the presence of increasing numbers of students who, because of their prior education, non-English language background, and demands on their time from work and family are stressed and sometimes under-prepared. These students deserve instructional approaches that break down barriers to success.

It is within this context that Dr. Darling has written an exciting and practical guide that aims to help instructors transform their teaching practices. In spite of all the challenges present in community college teaching and learning, there is a tremendous amount of expertise to support the wide array of students who enroll, hoping for a better life. However, this guide is also a quiet call to action for community college administrators to recognize and support their instructors' expertise. Dr. Darling and her colleagues, sometimes through difficult-to-hear examples, describe the challenges facing community college instructors in being responsive to multiple expectations and needs. The first five chapters are written in Dr. Darling's voice and cover a wide range of topics related to instructional practices (the author's preferred nomenclature for what is commonly described as pedagogy), including a brief discussion of mindset theory, a 21st century consideration of educational psychology theories, and a discussion of the value of inquiry-based, collaborative, and active learning classroom environments. Three brief chapters follow, written by community college instructors and researchers that reflect, specifically, on three populations of community college enrollees, Black males, Latinx students, and multilingual students, and the challenges they historically and currently face in attaining community college success. The final two chapters call out the importance of preparing students for college and career readiness and life skills to promote academic success.

At the core of the volume is a narrative of expertise. Beginning in Chapter One, Dr. Darling positions community college instructors as innovative experts. To bolster her claims of instructors' expertise, she introduces several related cognitive science and instructional discourse concepts, including schema, instructional moves (which she describes as a unique form of self-expression), and asset-based approaches to instruction. She pairs these theoretical and conceptual frames with educational improvement science approaches to disrupting systemic inequity and creating change. Dr. Darling reminds readers that instructors have schemas about why and how to teach their content. They also have schemas about their students. She encourages instructors to become more aware of these schemas and their influence on instructional practices. To this end, she promotes an asset-based model of instruction and asset-based approaches to community college instructional professional development. In both cases, the aim is to see the strengths of students and to consider how and whether their instructional practices do or can tap into and build on these assets. Chapter One's description of continuous cycles of instructional improvement centers instructors as researchers in their classrooms, and of their practice. Within the context of continuous improvement, Dr. Darling describes formative approaches to collecting and using data as a means for refining instruction. The subsection "What Counts as Evidence or Data?" offers useful advice about measurable tools to tap into persistence, engagement, and attitudes, among other things. Instructors reading this guide would have benefited from pointers to current practitioner literature and empirical efforts to build their understandings of how such tools and approaches are applied in practice.

The subsequent chapters describe the challenges and needs of community college students and offer resilience stories. They offer brief but useful characterizations of students one would likely encounter in many of the community college classrooms around the nation. The chapters would have communicated their message more powerfully had they been placed in a more logical sequence; the scope goes from narrow to broad and back again from chapter to chapter, which can be a bit confusing for the reader.

Chapter Two offers an excellent discussion of mindsets, paying particular attention to the importance of moving away from IRE styles of teaching; encouraging students to elaborate on their thinking away from "the correctness of the students' answer toward the students' unique reasoning and approach" (p.31). The subsection on assessments deserved a broader discussion, particularly given the

later subsection on equity moves in discussions. Formative assessments for equity would have been a natural entry in support of this topic. The subsection on wise feedback is excellent and could easily have been an entire chapter.

There are some limitations in this volume, seen in the guide's discussions of language and identity. The chapter (Chapter Eight) on multilingual students was all too brief while attempting to cover a wide range of complex topics: language development theories, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, and Krashen's five hypotheses. It would have been good to see, instead, a few choice examples that illustrated how to apply some of the nine suggested strategies in pedagogy and assessment. It would be difficult, without specific examples, to apply the nine strategies to actual, day-to-day practice. This was also a limitation in the section on college and career readiness. More detail and examples would have been beneficial to instructors looking to build college and career skills as an integrated element of classroom instruction.

Throughout the book, it would have been nice to have seen more nuanced discussions of identity. Racial and ethnic discussions of students don't reflect, for example, Afro-Latinos in the North and Southeast parts of the U.S., nor are instructors encouraged not to make assumptions about how students identify with respect to race and gender. In a time when so many community college students are returning veterans, the volume would have benefited from reminding instructors about the particular challenges that veterans bring to the classroom.

The author's attention to the challenges of creating equitable and inclusive learning environments in online instruction is needed and welcomed. As recent research has highlighted, online instruction does not ameliorate the language and learning issues present in face-to-face learning. In fact, online learning environments and instructional practices present challenges for successful adult learning (Lloh, 2018). The volume reminds us that equity-based pedagogy must extend to the online platform. Given the increasing numbers of students who, because of myriad family and work demands, migrate to online learning, we must do a better job of creating equitable learning contexts for all.

All in all, this volume addresses a range of topics centered on community college instructional practices and community college students. While, for the most part, the volume does not provide a deep treatment of the issues, its central message emphasizes the expertise that rests in instructors and the need to grow and apply this instructional expertise in the service of equity for all students. This renders this guide a welcomed addition to the growing literature on community colleges, instructors, and the students they serve. The guide provides a helpful examination of current issues in community college instruction.

References

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