Engaging Minds: Learning and Teaching in a Complex World


Engaging Minds: Learning and Teaching in a Complex World draws on recent social constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning, as well as recent theorizing about complex systems to provide a reflective introduction to key issues of pedagogy. This is a serious attempt to create a new hybrid form of text that provides an introduction to the field within an essay genre, largely omitting the predictable sketches of key theories and dot-point summaries of practical implications, and offering instead an integrated framework devised by the authors. The student or reader is required to engage in extended consideration of how learning occurs in a complex world and to reflect in some depth on the integrative framework offered by the authors.

The authors’ project is actually a very challenging one. They have endeavoured to provide a joint vision of a conceptual framework for teaching and learning that provokes engagement with ideas rather than acceptance of specific recipes for action. The text is presented in five chapters, dealing in turn with perception, cognition, ability, identity, and language. The choice of only five issues resonates with the belief that 'less is more', that it is better to reflect seriously on a few core concepts and their interrelationships than to cover a multitude of loosely related topics. Each chapter is divided into three sections - the first presents working ideas on conceptual matters related to the topic; the second draws upon the experience of the authors as university-based teachers in order to illustrate the way particular sensibilities can be enacted within existing educational institutions; the third section provides more specific recommendations on teaching approaches that are informed and practical.

My guess is that Engaging Minds will evoke very different responses from readers. The authors are clearly dedicated and thoughtful teachers with a rich collective history to draw upon as they attempt to give a grounded vision of their notion of good teaching and learning. I agreed with their stated goal of refusing to simplify pedagogical problems. I endorse their preferred theoretical orientation to issues of pedagogy, namely, an approach based on social constructivist and sociocultural theories and methods. The text is written in an intelligent, persuasive and accessible style - it would be quite challenging for most undergraduate students, but the arguments are presented with clarity and reasoned conclusions are drawn. So I entered into reviewing Engaging Minds with a very positive
initial stance, but finally I began to question the overall approach adopted by the authors. I began to notice important omissions, and finally I began to wonder whether the tone was too nostalgic and somewhat conservative to offer a way forward for the challenges of contemporary education.

With regard to style, the text is almost entirely free of references to other theorists or researchers. When contentious issues are weighed, the authors present the arguments and then give their own considered conclusions. This style gives coherence to the text, and enables the three authors to speak with one voice, although they draw upon different experiences. The sound of challenging and contesting voices is smoothed and, to a large extent, harmonized by an authoritative collective voice. I agreed with many of their conclusions, questioned aspects of some of their contentions, and disagreed strongly in places. Without references to specific studies or theorists, my various concerns were difficult to anchor or to explore further. The authors’ effort to create coherence and to filter and transform the theories and research of other people into their collective voice, presents the reader with the ‘voice of authority’ rather than a conversational partner ready to dialogue. A quite contradictory message is conveyed to students about the process of intellectual inquiry when the text adopts such an approach. The authors’ approach is premised on the social constructivist assumption that knowledge is always created from a point-of-view. Yet, the style of presentation and referencing creates a more abstracted and less contestable authorial position.

With regard to omissions, I looked through the text for engagement with issues of difference and diversity. There are a number of explicit references to these issues, particularly in the third chapter on ability, and towards the end of the book where categories of differences are discussed. Diversity is dealt with primarily in terms of psychological constructs such as IQ, giftedness, creativity, and learning disabilities. The authors caution against the use of such labels and highlight negative expectations that arise from such constructs as children are divided into groups. These sentiments are laudatory, but inadequate. Current research on multicultural and antiracist education has made us intensely aware that students are positioned in more or less powerful ways by their personal histories and characteristics, and the degree to which these are valued or not within educational institutions.

Contemporary pedagogy must be critically aware of the way diversity is not only accommodated but is constructed within educational institutions. The authors actually give a specific instance where
issues of race and racism are addressed, but the example itself reveals the limits of their approach. In chapter 5, an incident is analysed where a student originally from South Asia complains in her journal that other students regard her a person of colour and make assumptions about her on that basis. Her claim in the journal is that everyone is a person of colour - white, or pink, or brown, etc. The teacher decides to explicitly address this issue by having the students paint their own skin colour. During this activity the students were forced to mix a variety of colours and shades in order to approximate their skin tone. So, what did the students learn? To quote from the authors:

This activity and discussion helped students understand that it was really inappropriate to identify some people as being ‘of colour’ and other people ‘white’. Further, it helped them to more fully appreciate the ways that long-standing traces of bigotry were woven through these common markers (p. 246).

We are all people of colour! Is this the desired outcome? The teaching strategy tends to obfuscate the historical and contemporary forms of oppression and disadvantage that people of colour experience in western countries. It reduces the problem of discrimination and marginalization to a perceptual and linguistic difficulty of accurately labeling skin colours. I am sure the authors did not intend this kind of obfuscation, but by focusing on perceptual and linguistic processes as the underlying causes of racism they remove the need for a more searching examination of the social, cultural, and political processes that construct and maintain racism for the benefit of those in more powerful positions in society.

With regard to the third concern I mentioned above - the nostalgic and conservative tone of the text - it is quite remarkable that there is almost no mention of the computer and the cybertechnologies that are currently transforming our economies, our everyday activities, and, in particular, the way we communicate with each other, and produce text. Engaging Minds claims to examine the place of technology in schooling and its impact on cognition, yet is largely silent about the transformative effects of tecnologies on core aspects of teaching and learning. It seems not to matter to the authors what technology is used to produce text. Is writing the same process on clay tablets, parchment, slates, and paper? Is there any difference in composing a text within a computer-supported environment versus a paper-and-pencil environment. What processes of text-production are legitimate? Can I copy the style and genre of a great essayist or poet, but not cut, paste, and edit an
existing file that I locate on the net? How are computer technologies challenging our accepted notions of authorship? These and many other issues need to be addressed.

We could easily be in the 19th century in terms of the types of teaching examples chosen to represent literary activities in schools, and the illustrations chosen to complement the text. The illustrations are simple, inexpensive (actually cost may have been factor that determined choice), and overwhelmingly old-fashioned in form and content. The classroom activities that are described involve students writing about beans, old shoes, buttons, and about their mother’s kitchen floor. These topics are designed to draw out of students their memories and personal perceptions. They are being apprenticed as essayists - it is the isolated, reflective and introspective subject that is being created in these activities - a subjectivity that is far removed from the harsher realities that confront most students in contemporary urban school environments. As a reader, I felt the tug of nostalgia for a simpler, more bookish, and comfortable society. I doubt that there are many answers to the pressing problems of contemporary schooling in these types of activities. I also doubt that the sensibilities and subjectivities of students emerging from these activities would enable them to participate in transforming current social structures.

Given the rather critical tone of my comments, why did I suggest some readers may have a more positive response to the book. In many places, we can benefit from the scholarship of the authors, for example, I found the distinction between complicated and complex systems a very generative one. I found their considered conclusions often summarized ideas succinctly, for example, where they write about the relationship between identity and knowledge: ‘The agent’s activity and identity are inseparable from his her or its knowledge. Knowing is doing is being’ (p. 78). So, have a look for yourself. See if it engages your mind productively and offers insights for transformative teaching practices. I have my doubts. However, I much prefer this (flawed) attempt to engage reflectively with key aspects of contemporary theories of teaching and learning to the alternative of producing yet another introductory educational psychology text.

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