

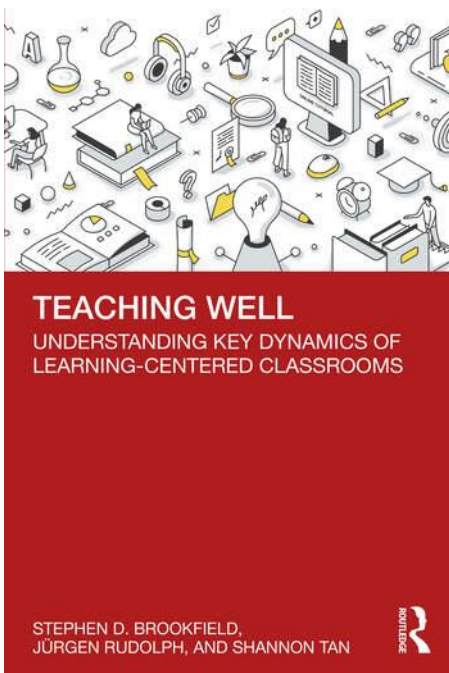
Editors: Dr. Margarita Kefalaki & Dr. Fotini Diamantidaki

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### Book Review

**Brookfield, Stephen D., Rudolph, Jürgen & Tan, Shannon (2024). Teaching well: Understanding key dynamics of learning-centered classrooms. Routledge.**

**A Anand Naidu <sup>1</sup>**



As the title aptly suggests, ‘Teaching Well’ is a book that explores what it essentially means to teach well and is authored by Professor Stephen Brookfield, Dr Jürgen Rudolph and Ms Shannon Tan. Contrary to my initial opinion however, the book does not prescribe itself as a manual of best practices that enables teachers to perform well within the rapidly evolving learning and teaching sphere. Instead, and indeed interestingly enough, the book adopts a highly personalised and conversational approach to what it means to teach well based on Brookfield’s, and the co-authors, own life journey and rich teaching experiences. I found this to be the highlight of the book. ‘Teaching Well’ is a highly relevant and fascinating read for a number of good reasons. Primarily, the conversational approach made it easy for me to resonate with Brookfield’s, and the co-authors’, reflections on their personal teaching experiences, successes, struggles and

failures, doubts as well as enthusiasm for the ways forward. It inspired, encouraged and provided assurances that I was not alone as an educator as I navigated across the thirteen major questions that were being addressed within the book. Given the personalised approach applied within the book, I have decided to adopt a similar theme for this book review as well.

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I am an educator within the higher education sector who is on the wrong side of forty. Having been in this industry for almost two decades, the past few years have seen me witness increasing changes within the classroom dynamic. Especially post-pandemic, the increased emergence of online, hybrid, blended learning as well as changing mindsets and expectations of both students and institutions alike have done little to hamper my enthusiasm for the profession at any level. They have, however, seen me questioning the validity of many of my past teaching practices that I humbly believe have made me relatively successful as an educator. I now find myself constantly seeking fresher, relevant, more creative and innovative teaching methods, which at times have been met with muted responses, failures, feelings of isolation and at times, inadequacy and being left completely drained. When co-author Jürgen speaks about this, I could relate wholeheartedly. With no formal education in teaching (I studied business and teach within this area), I have always struggled to understand what essential best teaching practices are, if I am at all doing things the way they should be and if indeed I am good enough to be teaching in the first place. It is for all the aforementioned reasons that reading this book, at a very personal level, felt timely.

One of the first things that this book made me realise was that teaching was not specifically about any real methodology or set of standard practices. Instead, Brookfield emphasises that teaching is essentially anything that makes students learn or develop a skill set. It was highly assuring to realise that I was not alone in feeling many of the anxieties that I face as an educator. Brookfield himself explains his own struggles and demolishes the idea behind the importance of charismatic teachers and that teachers are solely responsible when classes do or do not go well. I enthusiastically acknowledged the points surrounding dying a hundred small deaths and teachers not being the centre of the universe. I was personally drawn to Brookfield's take on emotional agonising as well as his honesty in claiming that the image of a good class rarely occurred in his lessons. The humility present here is, indeed, humbling. It leaves you thinking that perhaps you are not doing too badly yourself as an educator, and for that, this book deserves a great level of credit. This is important for any educator, as I have lived through such moments all too often, and the book's highly relevant discussion on impostership felt especially personal. The feeling of not fitting in and the sense of failure after a poor class are all highly relatable. The fact that it is being discussed by Brookfield himself makes it surreal, and therefore, much more encouraging to an educator like me.

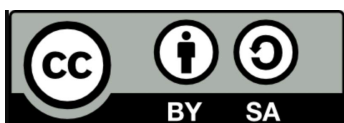
I have always advocated for a learning-centred classroom and could, therefore, align with Brookfield's proposition to connect with readers viscerally and emotionally. I further concurred with the assertion that there has been a gradual transition from teacher to instructional designer. The rule of three in adopting varying pedagogic modalities, no two classrooms being alike, the importance of two-way communication and the encouragement of community for teachers were highly refreshing and represent key takeaways of excellent practical ideas to develop and utilise as an educator. More importantly, I realised that many of the things that I have been doing in a highly unstructured and informal manner over the years were being prescribed within the book, and this felt highly comforting.

Perhaps one of the biggest revelations for me within the book was the importance that Brookfield places on silence. I had always believed that silence should not be encouraged in an effective classroom setting. There should always be a buzz, I had falsely assumed. Having read the book, I am now a convert and am comfortable being silent in thinking and in structured silence. Thank you, Stephen Brookfield, for such wonderful insights! In addition, the discussions on autobiographical disclosure and mistrust in the internal dialogue touched home at a very deep level. Brookfield's assertion that the link to one's development of teaching styles is linked to one's own student experiences lends to the argument as to why teachers are made and not born. I loved the suggestion of discussing failures with students, especially on struggles during one's own lifelong learning, as it helps in reducing student anxiety. I fully intend to do more of this moving forward as I was able to reflect on such an experience. My lecturer had done similarly so in the past during my very own student journey and that had significantly impacted left then on me, a struggling student. I had forgotten, over the years, and this book aided in rekindling that moment. In addition, the note on the level of self-deprecation to be applied was also significant to me as I do it quite often for the same reasons as Brookfield had proposed. The negative consequences, however, I did not quite take note of, and this has now proved to be highly valuable.

Ever a proponent of discussions within the classroom, I was intrigued by the differences inherent within such discussions. The constitutes of a bona fide discussion, guided talks, structured discussions and the like were essentially things that I never quite thought about and I was left amazed by Brookfield's suggestions on how to equalise and broaden the opportunity of participation within such discussions. The importance of relationships formed during discussions and the learning journey that encourages participation and community took further emphasis and meaning after the narration of Brookfield's own struggles during his swimming lessons.

Lastly, the evaluation of educators has always been a contentious issue. The discussion on metrification and the radical role that teachers play in subverting educational institutional constraints aligned with me, the modern educator grappling with what *worked* in the past and what *will work* moving forward. Brookfield himself discusses the flawed obsessions with metrics to guide evaluations of teachers. His take on critical reflection through the four lenses of students' eyes, one's autobiography as a learner and teacher, colleagues' perceptions and the lens of theory has provided me with a much clearer perspective on how I can determine my own performance and continue to progress as an educator. There is obviously more rich content that is adequately discussed within the book that not only inspires but also evokes strong opinions such as power, racism, classroom democracy, critical thinking and teaching, as well as developing a career in teaching, all of which make for essential reading and application.

In sum, I strongly recommend this book to any teacher who has forged a successful career, someone starting out in this industry or someone like me, one who has thus far adopted a highly unstructured teaching style that has worked relatively well (and failed in certain aspects) in the past and is now transitioning into a dynamic new teaching and learning environment into the future. Enjoy the journey as you navigate the questions being addressed by Brookfield that truly educate, inspire and encourage you to reflect, experiment, and develop in this truly fascinating chosen profession of ours.



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