Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis's 2022 thorough yet approachable book *The New College Classroom* seeks to transform the university learning experience into one that is more interactive and engaging than the current standard techniques of lectures and controlled discussions. This guide for integrating what they term
“participatory learning” is rooted in prior conceptions of progressive education strategies including but not limited to Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Felicia Rose Chavez, Sandy Grande, Max Liboiron, Bettina Love, Carla Shedd, and Helen Verran. In addition to these sources which have in some cases been available and accessible for decades, Davidson and Katopodis showcase examples of participatory methods and exercises currently being practiced by scholars across the United States.

The book’s structure is divided into two major sections: “Changing Ourselves” and “Changing Our Classrooms.” The former is relatively short, with a focus on examining the assumptions and structures of the modern university and how they get passed along through generations of scholars. “Changing Our Classrooms” makes up the majority of the book, focusing on putting “the theory of active learning into useful and usable form, in any kind of classroom, in any discipline, anywhere” (17). Closing out the book is a short chapter called “Changing the World,” which thinks through how the book’s proposed style of pedagogy could be used to bring about social and institutional change.

The book’s fourth chapter, “Before the First Class,” explores all the elements of course planning, providing an array of ideas for how to incorporate participatory learning techniques into every facet of any given class and foster an environment for student engagement. Within the chapter are eight subsections:

- “Crafting a Syllabus That Works for Every Student”
- “Cocreating a Syllabus with Students”
- “Estimating Student Workload”
- “Innovative Textbook Design and Online Resources”
- “Establishing the Goals of the Course”
- “Building Midterm Reflection into the Course Design”
- “Making Class Time Count”
The chapter provides ways to follow department mandates for course content while still leaving room to incorporate relevant topics of student interest. The examples of participatory learning exercises come from across disciplines, emphasizing that this form of learning is just as successful in physics and engineering classrooms as it is in literature and art history.

In addition to teaching methods, the chapter provides overviews of the history of the American university system and some of its core values. “Crafting a Syllabus That Works for Every Student” includes a brief explanation of the origin of the syllabus, and “Estimating Student Workload” illustrates how Taylorist conceptions of rigor and productivity have snowballed into a university system populated by overworked students who learn less.

Despite Davidson and Katopodis’ clear, admirable, and largely successful interest in creating a more accessible classroom, they frequently underemphasize the continuing need to adapt course structure and content for the COVID-19 pandemic. Accessibility in the book primarily refers to accommodations for students with visual and/or auditory impairments without addressing the needs of immune-compromised students and professors risking their lives to attend classes in the middle of an ongoing pandemic. There are no suggestions for how to adapt participatory learning methods for hybrid courses in which some students participate virtually and others in-person, nor for accommodating those suffering from the effects of Long COVID. This is not unexpected but is a disappointing oversight nonetheless for a book that otherwise succeeds at providing instructors with creative and engaging strategies to enhance learning for all of their students.

Obviously there is not enough room in a single book to include
everything, but it feels like an oversight to not include this in the “Bridging Distance Online” section of the chapter. This section explains how to adapt participatory learning methods to synchronous online classes, but not how to bridge the divide between students attending a course in the physical classroom and those participating virtually in the same sessions.

May 18, 2023 [Uncategorized]

Leave a Reply

Your e-mail address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment *

Name *

E-mail address *

Web site

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

Post Comment
This site is part of the HASTAC network on Humanities Commons.

Explore other sites on this network or register to build your own.

Terms of Service    Privacy Policy    Guidelines for Participation