Review: Introduction and Chapter 1 of Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis’s *The New College Classroom*

Matthew Choi Taitano

HASTAC Collaborative Book Review, May 2023

Review of Introduction

The Introduction of *The New College Classroom* by Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis begins with two quotes before the actual text. The first quote, which is on a separate page by itself, is by Audre Lorde: “We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings.” The other quote, which is on the next page under the “Introduction” header, is by science fiction writer and educator Samuel Delany:

Don’t you realize that every time you don’t answer a question, you’re learning something? You’re learning how to make do with what you got, and you’re learning how not to ask for a raise. . . . You’re learning how to take it. That’s not good. . . . So, from now on, whenever I ask a question, everybody’s got to put their hand up. I don’t care whether you know the answer or not. You have to put your hand up. . . . [W]e need to teach people they are important enough to say what they have to say. (1)

These two quotes are a nice setup for the themes addressed in the introduction, which is divided into the following six subsections: “The Problem,” “The Alternative,” “Why Change?”, “Success for Every Student,” “What Is Learning?”, and “The New College Classroom.”

“The Problem” points to the issue of silence that occurs in many departmental meetings. As Davidson and Katopodis describe in the opening lines, “Fifty people—faculty members and graduate students—sit silently in a department meeting as the chair offers a question, scowls, and tries again. No one speaks; no one is happy” (1). This meeting is to discuss the department’s collective goals for the following year. Despite the importance of such a meeting, Davidson and Katopodis explain, “We’ve all been there at one time or another, when a demoralizing silence settles in and suffocates a conversation” (2). The “we” that Davidson and Katopodis imply that their audience consists of academics like them. Specifically in this context, they are referring to faculty and grad students and the hierarchical structures that impact decisions on departmental goals. Furthermore, the demoralizing silence that the authors point out reflects how grad students often feel pressured to “fear the yes within ourselves,” as Lorde articulates, in the midst of faculty members because of institutional power structures that make us doubt our agency. Not only that but also grad students, due to the common exploitation of their labor by faculty and
universities, often need to be reminded to raise their hands, as Delany urges, because their perspectives, in particular, are valuable in reimagining and recreating a more diverse and inclusive academic life for current and future scholars.

“The Alternative” offers a solution to the issue of silence addressed in the previous subsection. Katopodis, namely, is the one who provided this solution when she was finishing her Ph.D. and “was the graduate student who spoke up at that stalled department meeting.” (3). She writes further: “I suggested a participatory exercise known by active learning educators as ‘Think-Pair-Share’ and by management experts at places like the Harvard Business School as ‘radical’ or ‘deep’ listening” (3). Think-Pair-Share incorporates “basic, interactive techniques are often used by K-12 teachers, where the focus is on the improvement of each and every student (that is, ‘student-centered learning’) and are commonplace in executive training, management programs, conflict resolution, and other situations where the goal is for everyone to learn how to contribute effectively and equitably.” (3) Davidson has also used Think-Pair-Share pedagogical strategies in her “classes and in virtually every keynote address and public lecture” and states that she hears back from “teachers who insist they still use that tactic in their course” (5).

“Why Change?” probes us to consider the repercussions of sticking with the pedagogical status quo. Davidson and Katopodis cite Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine’s study in which the two reached “the depressing conclusion that students become more bored and less interested in learning as they get older” (6). Going deeper, Davidson and Katopodis urge us to consider more personal questions and contexts: “What about college? Or let’s make this personal: what about our classrooms and yours? College is voluntary. Students don’t have to, by law, attend college, and they don’t have to stay there. They do, however, have to fulfill distribution, general education, and major requirements in order to graduate” (6). These bureaucracies of curricula in higher education, which construe students as a uniform entity, call into question the efficacy of such bureaucracies in inspiring curiosity within students.

“Success for Every Student” considers the potential of a reimagined way of instruction that takes place at an individual level, in which each student’s interests and strengths are considered in the crafting of their education. In addition, Davidson and Katopodis make a bold claim about the book: “One common ingredient in almost all of the methods in this book is that they are designed to help every student be better than they were, wherever they started” (9). According to the authors, they designed “The New College Classroom so that the transformation can go as deep as you wish, from just the first five minutes of every class meeting to a full course or even department-wide overhaul” (11).

“What Is Learning?” begins with Davidson writing that she “witnessed the crucial difference between being inspired by a lecture and actually learning from one” (12). Katopodis shares her own testimony of the success of similar instructional and learning strategies in her own department:

Instead of losing ourselves in our own thoughts during a lecture, active learning requires us to do something (that is, actively) with the content—like the faculty members
at...[Katopodis’s]...department meeting brainstorming in small, intimate groups, working through their ideas by discussing them with peers, hashing them out, refining them, negotiating across different perspectives or different versions of the same idea, and then offering up the results constructively to others at the meeting. (14)

The success of incorporating these collaborative and inspiring pedagogical practices in the classroom, as exemplified by the experiences of Davidson, Katopodis, and their colleagues, sets the stage for the larger mission of this book. In the last subsection of the Introduction—titled “The New College Classroom,” harkening to the title of the book—Davidson and Katopodis claim to “present tested ways to begin changing our ourselves, our classrooms, our institutions, and our society” (18).

While the goals of the book are ambitious and admirable, there is certainly room for clarifying key terms used in the Introduction that would highly benefit readers who are new to the topics at hand and strengthen the important goals and questions of Davidson and Katopodis’s research and arguments. For example, in the subsection “Success for Every Student,” Davidson and Katopodis write, “Active, participatory learning puts into pedagogical practice the values of fairness, inclusion, diversity, equity, and antidiscrimination (racial, gendered, sexual, classist, ageist, and ableist)” (10). While the intersectional lens through which Davidson and Katopodis is important and respectable, it is also important to be detailed and clear when using terms that define objects and systems of oppression against marginalized groups, such as the parenthetical terms at the end of the authors’ sentence. Simply listing such terms, and especially listing them in parentheses, can possibly make the inclusion of these terms (as well as terms like “fairness, inclusion, diversity, equity, and antidiscrimination”) within the book appear performative. Instead, including definitions of these terms and how they uniquely function can better clarify and strengthen Davidson and Katopodis’s amazing and inspiring goals to help others “own [their] mission to transform the classroom into a more effective, inspiring, democratic space” with the tools provided in The New College Classroom.
In “Where It Started,” Davidson and Katopodis begin by stating, “Before we change our classrooms, we need to look inwards at ourselves and backward to understand how we got here” (21). They also claim that “[w]e have inherited attitudes, structures, and expectations that are not of our own making” (21). In turn, they urge us that “[t]o embrace the goal of making the classroom a place where every student learns and improves, we need to unlearn some of our most deeply inculcated assumptions about the function of higher education” (21).

“Where Are We Now” opens with a powerful and optimistic outlook on the potential for reimagining the classroom into an engaging and liberating space free from oppressive standards: “We’re at exactly the right moment when we can unlearn a system originally designed for standardization, for ranking and rating the elite few. Instead, we can find fair and effective new ways to teach the diverse men and women in our classes today” (25). Expanding on some of the systems of oppression that they list previously in the Introduction, Davidson and Katopodis state:

educational achievement today correlates closely with wealth. Excellent schools, private tutors for entrance exams, and other costly ways of improving a child’s chances of being admitted to college mean that the wealthiest students have a head start. These factors together mean that too much of higher education contributes to, stabilizes, and perpetuates income inequality and all the attendant social inequalities that correlate with income—specifically, racial, ethnic, and gender disparities within and across institutions and fields. (27)

By using class disparity as a lens to discuss other intersecting disparities along racial, ethnic, and gendered lines, Davidson and Katopodis are able to point to a specific structural issue (i.e., classism) to branch out into addressing other inequalities. In turn, both interdisciplinarity and intersectionality are powerful tools that the authors use in order to help craft their radical and revolutionary pedagogical practices that help reimagine and solidify the “New College Classroom.”

Overall, Chapter 1 of The New College Classroom puts forth a helpful juxtaposition where things started and where things are now regarding instruction in the classroom. Davidson and Katopodis offer hopeful arguments that push us to fight against the status quo and to view instruction through an intersectional lens. By starting their book in such a way, Davidson and Katopodis inspire students and instructors to actively engage in the classroom in order to dismantle oppressive bureaucracies and reimagine the classroom in a diverse and inclusive manner.