This volume by Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis situates itself as a guidebook to rethinking and restructuring traditional teaching, and subsequently learning, practices for a modern, diverse, and equitable college classroom. The authors set out to provide practical answers to an essential question—namely, how can we “teach for every student—not only for the ones who most resemble us, their instructors” (xii). The suggestions offered in this book are derived from the authors’ own interactions with other researchers and instructors who have successfully implemented changes in their teaching and course design in order to reach every student. Davidson and Katopodis have additionally “test driven” these methods in their own classrooms, both in-person and virtual, and adapted them based on student response. From a theoretical and philosophical standpoint, this volume owes a considerable deal to John Dewey, Paolo Freire, bell hooks, and Maria Montessori, among many others. Like them, the authors argue for the potential of the classroom “to model how we can engage and contribute to an inclusive, democratic, and just society that functions better for everyone” (10).

_The New College Classroom_ consists of twelve chapters in two sections, with an introduction and conclusion, twenty-four pages of notes, and an index. A table of contents is included at the end of this review. The introduction lays out the importance of adopting active learning methods from both a theoretical standpoint—frequently citing the advocates for egalitarian approaches to education mentioned above—and from a proven scientific basis, referencing papers like the 2018 _PNAS_ study (4). While the discussion is valuable and convincingly demonstrates the importance of “radical pedagogy”, it frequently circles back on itself and could be substantially condensed while remaining effective.

Section one, “Changing Ourselves”, consists of three chapters and is framed by Davidson and Katopodis as a two-part invitation to examine “the deepest assumptions embedded in the institutional structure of the modern university” and to unlearn the bad pedagogical habits that have been perpetuated through such systems, including, but not limited to quantitative or ranked grading, summative feedback, and selective methods of classroom management (17). Chapter one, “Why Change Now”, which lays out the development of the modern American education system, successfully meets the first of these aims. Chapter two, “Structuring Active Learning”, follows on this by laying out four key pedagogical approaches developed by progressive era educators in response to the restrictive frameworks of the new educational system. One might then assume that the second aim of this section would be addressed in chapter three, “Teaching is Mentoring”, but in this the chapter falls somewhat short of the stated claim. While the chapter introduces good approaches to engaged and equitable
mentorship, it pushes the reader not to unlearn pedagogical habits inherited from the traditional university system, but rather know the resources made available to students in such systems so as to help students navigate and access them. Make no mistake, this is an important, if not vital recommendation. The invitation to unlearn bad habits seems only tentatively extended in these three chapters, not persuasively offered.

Section two, “Changing Our Classrooms”, spans nine chapters and constitutes the true “how to” heart of this purported guidebook. In these chapters Davidson and Katopodis put “the theory of active learning into useful and useable form” by offering practical, easy to understand methods and activities that can be introduced into course planning and instruction (17). Here is where the volume truly shines. For the reader picking up this book seeking guidance in designing a new course, reinventing an inherited syllabus, or invigorating classroom engagement, they are guaranteed to find some inspiration from the approaches laid out in each chapter. Chapter four, “Before the First Class”, covers various elements of course design, and introduces strategies for transforming the syllabus from a daunting, “risk management” document, to something that inspires student excitement. While the idea of a “participatory syllabus” is certainly appealing as a means of encouraging student investment in course content and policies, readers whose institutions require use of a standardized syllabus template that dictates precisely what language should be used and how it must appear may be disappointed by their inability to adopt many of the suggestions offered here. Such instructors may find some of the activities introduced in chapter five, “The First Class”, to be more helpful for creating engagement in and conversation around what might otherwise be a listless review of course requirements and institutional policies. These suggestions segue nicely into the exercises introduced in chapter six, “Activities for Any Day of the Term”, which are designed to facilitate active, participatory learning. Some of the authors’ recommendations will likely be familiar even to readers with limited exposure to active learning methods, such as “think–pair–share”. Davidson and Katopodis demonstrate how some common elements of course management, such as raising hands and drafting emails, can be adapted to encourage total participation from the class and to develop essential professional skills.

Chapter seven, “Democratic and Antiracist Pedagogy”, does not argue for the importance or necessity of equitable approaches to pedagogy—indeed, we might assume that anyone picking up this book is already critically aware of such a need. Rather, it introduces activities designed to create equal opportunities for participation and to “bring all students into respectful conversations without glossing over or even reconciling differences and without maintaining false perceptions” (126). Some will remain skeptical about the capacity of these suggestions to fully create an equitable classroom and to adequately address interpersonal tensions having to do with such things as race and class. They should do well to remember that the guidelines presented here are not intended to solve such problems, however, but rather to place us on a path towards remediation. Readers should carefully consider which approaches are best suited for their classrooms and the unique body of students that inhabit it.

The final chapters of section two delve into the topics of group work, structuring research projects, providing feedback and assigning grades, and how to move forward when attempts at altering the traditional class structure don’t work as anticipated. Of these, chapter
eight, “Group Work Without the Groans”, stands out as one of the weaker contributions to the volume. The authors rightly stress the importance of regular communication and accountability in collaborative work and point out that group work is, in fact, a critical professional skill. Yet this chapter lacks the specificity of examples for implementing, achieving, or demonstrating effective group work that are a major point of success of the preceding chapters. As Davidson and Katopodis point out, no one seems to like group work, and I speculate that the lack of concrete suggestions here is indicative of the difficulties that we encountered with group work as students ourselves and our continued struggle to adequately address this within the academy. Chapter nine, “Research That Inspires Creativity”, defines the research project as an active learning event present in many classrooms, but one which instructors should make sure serves as a point of curiosity and inspiration for students, rather than as busy work. Like chapter eight, the discussion largely lacks concrete suggestions for structuring class research projects—these appear almost exclusively as inset text—yet it addresses the crucial need for students to actively position themselves within their research topic and field. Not only does this produce stronger scholarship, but it also develops a sense of personal investment on the part of the student, maintaining their interest in the project. Of the final chapters in this volume, chapter ten, “Feedback That Really Works”, stands out to this reviewer as the strongest. Davidson and Katopodis distinguish between summative feedback, which provides little opportunity for guidance or improvement, and formative feedback, which is meant to develop a habit of revision. While the activities put forth in this chapter may not reach every student, most will find them an effective means of encouraging student engagement in their own learning process. Grades are discussed in chapter eleven, “Grades—Ugh!”, which advocates for critically and compassionately approaching the methods typically used to evaluate student work. The authors offer a brief history of ranking systems in education and break down a few of the inconsistencies that emerge when measuring grades against student learning and growth, and instructors are advised to consult with institution administrators before adopting any grading alternatives. Despite assuming an audience unfamiliar with active learning and radical pedagogy in the introduction of this volume, the authors repeatedly use terms such as “ungrading” and “contract grading” in this chapter without offering a definition. This may be confusing to some until they reach those sections that discuss these concepts in greater detail. In chapter twelve, “What Could Possibly Go Wrong?”, Davidson and Katopodis offer an approach for addressing failure or “stuckness” in the classroom—to reflect on what isn’t working, to look specifically at the problem, and to ensure that all concerned are involved in development of a solution (248–249).

Repetition of the line, “What if we are the people we are waiting for?”, which is used as a paragraph break without any clear rationale throughout the conclusion, subtitled “Changing the World”, is a call to action better suited to a manifesto than it is to a purported guidebook, which addresses those already seeking to change the classroom. The discussion returns to that of the introduction and section one, focusing on the idea that the institution, at its best, is designed or intended for social innovation and the development of a just society. Davidson and Katopodis argue that if every university followed missions “of purpose, invention, innovation, discovery, diversity, inclusion, inquiry, intellectual freedom, nurturing the human mind and
spirit, internationalism, creativity, leadership, [and] the future”, higher education would be on
the correct path (262). I wonder, however, if reimagining and restructuring our college
classrooms as sources and forces of social innovation can ever truly impact the systems of the
collegiate institution at large. In the introduction and first section of this book, the authors
aptly demonstrate that “the institution” is an elite, Western invention. How many of the
elements which currently pose challenges to meeting the stated ideal social missions of the
college are actually inseparable from the Western industrial and colonial history of the
institution? Is the change needed in the institution that of reinvention or dismantling? These are
questions for many further discussions.

Ideally, this book would be read by faculty of all levels at every sort of institution and of
every discipline. It lays out some of the systemic issues of the modern collegiate approach to
teaching, learning, and assessment, and provides a number of solid strategies for approaching
equitable course design and management that could be easily adapted for most classrooms.
Furthermore, the authors are sympathetic of institutional policies that may limit an instructor’s
ability to reimagine coursework in the ways that they would like. Speaking realistically, however,
the volume will most likely be picked up by early-career faculty or graduate instructors seeking
to bolster their limited pedagogical training, or by established professors who have grown
disillusioned with traditional methods of teaching.

My criticisms are limited. As previously commented on, the final chapters of this book,
beginning with chapter eight, lack the quality of concrete suggestions and models for the
classroom that is provided in the preceding chapters. They are also burdened by an overuse of
“inset” text, which generally provide specific case studies of instructor approaches to
assignments, research, and grading, some of which span multiple pages and seriously disrupt
reader engagement in the chapter discussion. It is not clear why some of these examples are
formatted as insets, rather than incorporated into the body text, and I wonder if the book might
have benefited from additional editorial oversight. I would be curious to know how Davidson
and Katopodis might expand their discussion about grading and cheating in chapter eleven in
light of the development of ChatGPT and other AI programs that have rapidly become available
to students. Perhaps a sequel is in order.

Contents

Preface ix
Introduction 1

I: Changing Ourselves

1. Why Change Now? 21
2. Structuring Active Learning 29
3. Teaching is Mentoring 39
II: Changing Our Classrooms

4. Before the First Class 57
5. The First Class 94
6. Activities for Any Day of the Term 110
7. Democratic and Antiracist Pedagogy 126
8. Group Work Without the Groans 142
9. Research That Inspires Creativity 168
10. Feedback That Really Works 195
11. Grades—Ugh! 222
12. What Could Possibly Go Wrong? 245

Conclusion: Changing the World 257

Notes 265
Acknowledgements 291
Index 295