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Book review

Eyler, J. R. (2018). *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories behind Effective College Teaching.* West Virginia University Press.

293 pages. Available in hardback, paperback, and digital format. Price $85 (hc), $22 (pb), $17 (ebook)

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More than ten years ago, Alfie Kohn published an article entitled "It's not what we teach; it's what they learn" (2008). Reading this article marked the beginning of a transformation in my outlook on teaching and learning. Until that point, I had invested most of my energy in becoming a subject matter expert, motivated by my belief that if I could just get better at presenting information and explaining things, students would learn better. Perhaps most instructors at the beginning of their teaching career go through such a phase of intense focus on subject matter expertise. After all, it is what we devoted ourselves to in graduate school. At some point however, if our students are lucky, we will arrive at the insight that it is not what we teach; it is what they learn.

Whether and how well students learn is closely tied to their engagement, the topic of many conversations, books, and workshops about classroom learning. Joshua Eyler's book *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories behind Effective College Teaching* (West Virginia University Press, 2018) is an important contribution to this field. Synthesizing recent findings from wide-ranging fields such as child development, cognitive neuroscience, and psychology, Eyler describes five factors that drive student engagement and thus enable learning: curiosity,

sociality, emotion, authenticity, and (surprisingly!) failure. Each of these topics is the title of a chapter in the book, following an introductory chapter in which Eyler presents his professional background and his motivation for writing the book.

Joshua Eyler started with a BA in English from Gettysburg College and went on to earn a Ph.D. in Medieval Studies from the University of Connecticut. After teaching in the English department at Columbus State for 5 years, Eyler moved into increasingly higher leadership roles at university centers dedicated to excellence in teaching and faculty development – first at George Mason University, then at Rice University (during which time he published *How Humans Learn*), and currently at the University of Mississippi. As he works with college instructors from a broad range of disciplines, his book contains relevant examples, important insights, and practical advice for virtually all educators. Beyond college instructors, those who teach at the high school level or in adult education will also find much to ponder in this book.

A synthesis of key scholarly research on the five central topics, Eyler's book is primarily directed at practitioners. Three "Getting Started" sections offering practical suggestions that readers can try in their own classrooms are interspersed throughout each chapter. At the end of every chapter are "Key Takeaways" summarizing the main points in bullet form.

Chapter 1 addresses the topic of curiosity. The human species thrives on curiosity, and children are innately curious. Sadly, their school experiences quickly transform curious children into bored students. Reviewing research demonstrating that exploration and inquisitiveness lead to learning, Eyler states that "to truly know anything we must first ask questions" (p. 24). He also shows that it matters whether the questions are generated by the instructor or by the student. Instructor-initiated questions are often part of a game I call pedagogical ping-pong, with the instructor asking a question and a student offering an answer, possibly with other students chiming in as well, always with the instructor as the focal point and arbiter of whether the answer is adequate. However, when we frame the role of question asker as the student's responsibility, we help students capitalize on their curiosity and promote their ability to "use questions to learn" (p. 36).

Asking questions is an inherently social practice. Chapter 2 addresses the topic of sociality, a fundamental aspect of human learning. From early childhood, other people are "the starting point for the way we experience the world" (p. 67). Family members and peers show us how things work and how to act upon our environment. For Eyler, teaching is a natural "augmentation of our sociality" (p. 76). However, we would be wrong to assume that learning happens only in the presence of an instructor. Students also learn from interactions with their classmates and peer instructors, which faculty can strategically incorporate in their course design. The section explaining the difference between collaborative learning versus group projects (pp. 91-95) was particularly helpful to me. I learned that, while students tend to

approach group work with a "divide and conquer" mentality, carefully designed collaborative learning projects cannot be completed with such an approach. The key is in developing assignments that do not have preconceived solutions or conclusions. At the end of the chapter, Eyler uses the argument of sociality to declare his distaste for online learning and his doubts about its potential for student success. While recognizing that it is possible for online course design to incorporate aspects of sociality, he questions "whether the technology allows us to tap into our sociality enough to maximize learning" (p.107). Nevertheless, online learning has offered unprecedented opportunities to students in rural areas and nontraditional students. Seeing the growth in online education in recent years, I expect Eyler's perspective to disturb some readers. Even among academics, emotions play a role in our ability to reason.

Emotion is the topic of chapter 3. It should come as no surprise that "emotions have great potential for enhancing learning but can sometimes undermine that process as well" (p. 115). More interesting to ponder is the ways in which emotions are "both biological and cultural" (p. 116), signaling an "interdependence between emotions and sociality" (p. 119). Three recommendations for instructors are particularly valuable: show your enthusiasm for your subject and the day's topic, try to use humor and laughter when appropriate, and display an ethic of pedagogical caring. While caring may sound vague, Eyler offers practical ways to embody it, such as learning and using students' names, as well as learning and connecting their interests to course content. It is in this chapter on emotions that the section "Don't be Scary", tucked oddly into chapter 1, would have fit better.

One of the emotions students might feel is boredom or annoyance, especially when they perceive learning contexts as inauthentic. In Chapter 4, focused on authenticity, Eyler defines authentic learning contexts as those in which content and parameters are as close to the "real world" as possible and in which students have to use "real-world" tools, techniques, and interactions to address challenges or solve problems. He argues that such contexts offer better opportunities for learning than contrived situations that students perceive as artificial and treat as meaningless. While simulations can be effective if designed well, they must be as authentic and immersive as possible for optimal learning results. Assignments that are as authentic as possible give students the opportunity to learn through experience, offering the potential for implementation of Kolb's model of experiential learning (2014). Eyler concludes: "The brain doesn't mess around. If it registers a situation as being artificial or unimportant, it will allocate cognitive resources elsewhere" (p. 170).

The final chapter focuses on failure, a topic not often treated positively in educational settings. When he was a student himself, Eyler was "certainly never rewarded for [his] failures" (p. 173), and even in graduate school, he remained unaware of the important possibilities that failure offers for learning. In early childhood, failure leads to novel techniques and new

discoveries. While failure's inherent potential for learning – as "a source of joyful experimentation" (p. 180) – does not change, students' attitudes toward failure do begin to change as they start school and begin experiencing failure as something for which they will be corrected, shamed, or punished. Eyler offers many examples of how failure, rather than success, can lead to better learning outcomes. At the end of the chapter, Eyler turns the conversation to "the elephant in the room" (p.212), namely grades. "Grades", he writes, "seem like a good idea, and on the surface they appear to have the potential to be useful, but by the end they subvert all the work you have been trying to do" (p. 212). Grades "stigmatize failure" (p. 213), and thus function only as an "extrinsic motivator, whereas educational pursuits need to be primarily intrinsic if they are to be transformational" (p. 213). Admitting that we operate in a system we can change neither single-handedly nor overnight, Eyler encourages readers to change their grading models. For the sake of student learning, he advises implementing a variety of smaller assignments with relatively few points attached to each, instead of 3-4 larger assignments each carrying a heavy portion of the final grade. This approach to assessment offers students the freedom to take risks and experiment without the threat of failing the course when things don't go as hoped.

In all, *How Humans Learn* provides much food for thought and an invitation to experiment with specific practices in our classrooms. Instructors might wish to read the book together in their professional learning circles as they join their minds and efforts to improve teaching and learning at their institutions.

References

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