

Review- Chapter Six 'Activities for any day of the term' from 'The New College Classroom' by Christina Katopodis and Cathy Davidson.

Britt Munro

Book Reviewed: Cathy N. Davidson & Christina Katopodis, *The New College Classroom*. Harvard University Press, 2022. Pp. ix, 303. ISBN 9780674249954.

It's Monday morning. You are rushing to your class, which begins, it seems, before the crack of dawn. You haven't figured out a brilliant, thoughtful way to engage your students and change their lives...

Reading these opening lines from the sixth chapter of Christina Katopodis and Cathy N. Davidson's guide to 'The New College Classroom,' I felt myself exhale. Here were writers who understood, not just theory of pedagogy, but pedagogy as it is lived, breathed and jumbled-through by imperfect human beings. Entering a conversation with Katopodis and Davidson is like slumping down in the staffroom at the end of a long day teaching, after all the higher-ups have gone home- you trade stories of successes, failures, slip-ups and if-onlys, and swap tips and strategies, holding nothing back because you take for granted that everyone trusts you are doing your best for your students within a difficult system. Reading this book as a stressed-out adjunct, I felt like Katopodis and Davidson had that same trust in me.

'Activities for any day of the term' is just that- a 'best of' compilation of activities that teachers can turn to at any time of the semester, online or off, to encourage participatory learning. The benefits of participatory learning have been outlined in earlier chapters (and there are many), so the authors can dive straight into describing the how. At the same time, Katopodis and Davidson are careful to explain their rationale for each activity- just what skills students, teachers, and the class as a whole can expect to be practicing. Katopodis and Davidson understand that conditions aren't perfect, and they constantly provide insights in recognition of this that make all the difference when it comes to actually implementing these activities in the classroom. For example, after suggesting that instructors ask students to write down 'an idea from the class that they can't stop thinking about or a lingering, burning question that they would like to discuss further' as an exit ticket at the end of the day, the authors add that if students can't think of what to write an instructor can 'invite them to write down what they think would make an unforgettable class topic' (116).

When I first began teaching, I dreamed of a chapter like this. Despite spending long hours gaining inspiration from the insights of bell hooks and Paulo Freire and being- in theory at least- thoroughly won over to the cause of participatory learning, I struggled to figure out how to actually structure this kind of learning into my classrooms and courses. This chapter shows, step by step, how to do just that. When I first began reading, it was just past the middle of semester in

my Composition III class and the initial enthusiasm was beginning to wane- students were still showing up, but they were increasingly distracted by other deadlines and a few loud voices had begun to dominate class discussion. In light of this, I decided to put some of the activities in this chapter to use, to see whether they could reinvigorate my own faltering classroom. Here is what I found.

The first activity I tried was a simple one- Think Pair Share, what Katopodis and Davidson call the 'Swiss army knife' of participatory pedagogy. Students have 90 seconds to write down their answer to a prompt, before pairing up with another student to swap answers and agree on one response to share with the broader class. Before trying out this activity I had been opening my class with a ten minute free write related to the readings. By the time Spring break rolled around, students were trailing in late and enthusiasm for sharing their freewrites had waned. I found that by jumping straight into think/pair/share instead, students all got the chance to speak and contribute ideas before we opened the floor up for general class discussion. This warmed up the classroom, gave everyone a sense of how their peers were relating to the texts and created a strong motivation for students to come to class prepared (as Katopodis and Davidson demonstrate, participatory pedagogy is great at creating horizontal accountability, which often works better than vertical as students are intrinsically motivated to show up for one other). I found that once I had established a pattern of opening the class with this sequence of activities, students began showing up on time having done the readings. Hearing from everyone at the start of class also gave us a way of weaving quieter students back into the discussion later on ('Lutfu, earlier you mentioned that...'). As the weeks passed, I found myself using think/pair/share more frequently throughout the class as well, in moments when we came upon a tricky question or when students just needed some extra time to process an answer with their peers. It worked every time.

Color-coded name cards are recommended by Katopodis and Davidson as a way of underscoring the importance of all class members, taking attendance and strengthening class community. While I had evaluated the feeling of community in my classroom halfway through the semester as pretty good, I was surprised to realize that not all my students knew each other's names. Implementing name cards with the colored dot system recommended by Katopodis and Davidson (green, yellow and red, where red = I am feeling sick/tired/shy and do not want to be called on today) went a long way towards strengthening the feeling of community and mutual communication and accountability in the classroom. It also helped to make students more consciously aware of how they were showing up in the class, which encouraged stronger individual accountability over time.

Interviewing is a skill offered by Katopodis and Davidson as a way to get students to practice close listening and engaging with ideas from the angle of not just answering, but actually asking questions (this often requires much deeper engagement). In my class I had one student interview another who had to pretend to be the writer of the article we had read. This was a lively session and some students ran with the task, taking on an entirely different persona as interviewee. By asking the interviewer, not only to come up with questions about the text but to report the

answers back to the class, a much deeper level of critical analysis and close listening was required. At the same time, asking the interviewee to not simply answer questions about their own response to the text but to actually get inside the mind of the writer required a higher level of critical engagement. Students rose to the occasion.

Each of the activities and techniques offered by Katopodis and Davidson in this chapter helped to redistribute power, energy and attention in my classroom so that lessons began to feel more like genuinely collaborative events. The level of investment from my students began to climb, and even I started feeling more excited to come to class. Ultimately, I think, Katopodis and Davidson's approach reinforces something that it has taken me a long time to learn as a teacher: that 'doing it all' as an instructor isn't just bad pedagogy, it's exhausting, and it overlooks our greatest resource in the classroom- our students, and their natural interest in and accountability to each other. Most importantly, Katopodis and Davidson show us how we can structure this realization into our classrooms and lesson plans, every hour of every day. At the heart of their work is a conviction that if students are bored, disengaged or passive it is not because they are bad students, but because they are functioning within a structure that is producing these effects. The same can be said for instructors. This is a deeply humanistic understanding of pedagogy, and one that I am excited to keep learning from.