

Stephen D. Brookfield



THE SKILLFUL TEACHER

On Technique, Trust, and
Responsiveness in the Classroom



THIRD EDITION

 JOSSEY-BASS™
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The Skillful Teacher

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Responsiveness in the Classroom

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Stephen D. Brookfield

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Published by Jossey-Bass
A Wiley Brand
One Montgomery Street, Suite 1000, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594—www.wiley.com,
www.josseybass.com/highereducation

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brookfield, Stephen.

The skillful teacher : on technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom / Stephen D. Brookfield.
— Third edition.

1 online resource. — (Jossey-bass higher and adult education series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

ISBN 978-1-119-01987-9 (pdf) — ISBN 978-1-119-01986-2 (epub) — ISBN 978-1-118-45029-1

(hardback) 1. College teaching. I. Title.

LB2331

378.1'25—dc23

2014049644

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Jossey-Bass Higher and
Adult Education Series

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Preface

In 2015 I celebrated my forty-fifth year as a teacher by publishing this third version of *The Skillful Teacher*, a book that had first appeared on my twentieth teaching anniversary. Although many of the ideas from the first and second editions have found their way into this one, I have had the chance to rethink and better understand the essential dynamics and complexities of good teaching. So I have rewritten the entire book, including adding six new chapters on topics I felt needed addressing.

The starting point for the first edition of this book that appeared 25 years ago is the same. I have not altered my conviction that the essence of skillful teaching lies in the teacher constantly researching how her students are experiencing learning and then making pedagogic decisions informed by the insights she gains from students' responses. The predictable rhythms of student learning, the importance of teachers' displaying credibility and authenticity, the need to vary instructional approaches—all these themes were highlighted in the first edition and they continue to inform my own thinking and practice.

But other things have crept into the mix of this teacher's life. There is the increasingly diverse student body most teachers work with today and the racial tensions this sometimes foregrounds, meaning that teaching about controversial issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia have entered many classrooms. There

is the explosion of online education, which, like it or not, will be a major part of all future teachers' lives. I have also come to a fuller appreciation of how we can exercise our power as teachers in responsible and effective ways to help students learn.

The importance of incorporating playful and creative elements into pedagogy has been something I have been forced to address, as is increasingly the experience of working in team teaching settings. I have also realized that teaching critical thinking is a project that crosses multiple disciplines and is central to higher education, as well as helping students take more responsibility for their learning. The latter is particularly important as the flipped classroom enjoins students to undertake more independent work in preparation for problem-focused classroom sessions. Consequently what you hold in your hands, or see on your screen, is a completely rewritten text.

My intention in writing *The Skillful Teacher* is to tell the real story of teaching as I live it. Although my own experience is front and center in the book, this is *not* because I feel my life is utterly fascinating! But I have noticed over the years that as I've described some of the tensions and contradictions I face in my own teaching, these often have universal elements embedded in them that others recognize. For example, the loss of self-confidence I feel when I pose what I think is a brilliantly provocative question only to be met by mute students and averted eyes is something most of us experience. I know I'm not alone in feeling thrilled when students say that what they've learned is useful, or that an activity we've completed is helpful. Alternately, I know that the demoralization and weariness I feel when, 10 minutes into a lesson, I realize I'm facing a trek through a parched desert of student disinterest is a common reaction.

All the institutions I've worked for operate on the assumption that teaching and learning are controllable and predictable and that we can set objectives for which student progress can be measured. Despite the system's apparent rationality, the one thing we can expect with total confidence is uncertainty. For me teaching is

full of unexpected events, unlooked-for surprises, and unanticipated twists and turns. It is also a highly emotional reality, a marvelously and frustratingly complex mix of moments when our hopes and plans are gloriously realized interspersed with episodes in which we feel lost and flailing. As I explore this mix I hope to show college teachers as flesh and blood human beings full of passions, foibles, and frailties. I want to understand how we can celebrate the messiness of teaching and how we can thrive in ever more diverse classrooms.

To me, then, *The Skillful Teacher* is a survival manual to help readers navigate the recurring and inevitable dilemmas, problems, and contradictions they face in their work. It is designed to reduce the mistaken and unjustified sense of guilt many of us feel when things don't go as they should and our classrooms seem out of control. There is nothing worse as a teacher than feeling that everyone else in your institution is in complete command—cool, calm, and collected paragons of pedagogic virtue—while your own classrooms never seem to conform to the plans you have developed for them. You think that everyone else's students are diligent, smart, and cooperative, while your own are truculent saboteurs, and that any problems you face have been created by your own incompetence.

This is a book meant for those difficult days—days when confusion and demoralization reign supreme in your world. On those days I want a book I can turn to that won't lie to me about the complexity I'm facing, that will tell me honestly how difficult it is to teach well, and that will give me some insight into how I might analyze and respond to my problems. The point of such a book would be to help me find the energy and courage I need to get back into class the next day fired by a renewed sense of purpose. That's a tall order for any book—and I know I'm bound to fall short—but *The Skillful Teacher* is my best shot at meeting it.

In writing this book I have set myself some difficult problems as an author. First, I've tried to ground whatever I write in easily recognized vignettes of college teaching. I've also attempted to write

in a way that would encourage, strengthen, and even inspire. I've done this knowing that writing with a desire to inspire is usually a death knell that ensures the opposite happens. I've also tried to display enough understanding of the diverse contexts and problems of college teaching to offer some insights, advice, and practical suggestions that would go beyond reassuring clichés or banal, supposedly inspiring generalities. In effect, these three motifs—the experiential, the inspirational, and the practical—run through the entire book. They dominate its organization, comprise its major themes, and represent its chief purposes.

On the experiential plane I want to present a picture of teaching that is recognizable and truthful to readers. I draw this picture partly based on my own experience but also on accounts of college teaching provided by numerous researchers. These accounts emphasize unpredictability, ambiguity, and frustration just as much as they do fulfillment, success, and satisfaction. On the inspirational plane, I want to assert the importance, meaning, and effect of college teaching in the face of the barrage of criticisms college teachers have endured in the last few decades. College teachers—and their students—change the world in small, and sometimes big, ways.

Although I am strongly influenced by critical theory and its belief that colleges are part of what Louis Althusser (1971) called the ideological state apparatus, I don't believe that teachers are blind to this fact or that they inevitably function as smooth, seamless agents of ideological indoctrination. Like Herbert Marcuse (1969), I think higher education is potentially an agent of liberation, opening students up to ideas and perspectives that had previously never occurred to them, and developing in them the requisite confidence in their own abilities and opinions that allows them to act on and in the world. So while I believe that colleges function in ways that reflect structural inequities in the wider society, I also believe that many teachers do their best to fight this tendency by developing their students' powers of critical thinking and increasing their sense of agency.

I also reject those conservative, almost apocalyptic analyses of higher education that ring the alarm bells of relativism, multiculturalism, and political correctness to argue that in the face of moral disintegration what we need is to hark back to an era of classically derived verities. These analyses fail to match the complex ambiguity of contemporary adulthood and serve to support the wishful thinking of those who believe that college teaching boils down to the inculcation of universally agreed-on facts and the appreciation of higher (usually Eurocentric) truths. This is a cocktail party view of academe that has as its rationale helping students to acquire a stock of culturally approved concepts, dates, facts, and names. In this view the purpose of higher education is to learn to impress peers by the number and variety of culturally sanctioned terms one can drop into the conversation, thereby demonstrating one's cultural literacy. From my standpoint cultural literacy requires the ability to critique the Eurocentric dominance of higher education curricula and to develop media and informational literacy about the explosion of information now available online.

Finally, on the practical level, I have tried to write a book that takes the major demands, dilemmas, and problems of college teaching and analyzes them in an informative and helpful way. It is easy to write a book long on experience and inspiration but short on practicalities. To avoid that danger I have analyzed the questions, issues, and concerns that have been raised most frequently by teachers in faculty development workshops I have run over the past 30 years. Answering those questions, issues, and concerns provides the focus for the chapters in this book. Most of these questions have had to do with practical issues, but a significant minority also deals with matters of political and emotional survival, which is why I have included chapters dealing with those themes. I provide plenty of suggestions and advice and give lots of exercises and techniques that I hope will help readers negotiate their way through the problems they face.

One difference in emphasis that *The Skillful Teacher* has when compared to many other texts on college teaching is that it is written from an adult educational perspective. I have often been puzzled by the absence of adult educational literature from books on college teaching. After all, college teaching is focused on learners who are partially or fully immersed in adulthood. In this sense, it is part of adult education. Yet the rich literature on adult learning and education is rarely acknowledged, let alone built on, in most works on college teaching. Teaching students in a variety of college settings is, to my mind, practicing a form of adult education. So one distinctive emphasis of *The Skillful Teacher* is the recognition of college students as early adult learners who benefit by being understood from the perspective of adult learning research, theory, and philosophy.

Because I wanted to write in a sympathetic way about the travails, pleasures, and serendipities of college teaching, I have adopted a particular prose style in the following pages. I have tried to cut down on citations of literature and to communicate as directly as possible using a conversational and personal tone. The book I would want to read for sustenance, advice, and encouragement after a bad day in the classroom would not be peppered with scholarly references and written in an academically formal manner. It would speak to me directly and concretely. So in *The Skillful Teacher* I have tried to write as I would speak, using the familiar *you* and the first person *I* throughout the text in an effort to cut down the distance between reader and author. I also use contractions—I'll, we're, it's—to support the conversational tone.

Audience

The audience for this book is college teachers at all levels and in all settings, of higher education. I hope that some of the book will also be interesting to upper level high school teachers. But there is no “typical” reader for this book. I don’t have in mind a particular kind

of teacher in a particular kind of college teaching a particular kind of subject. Instead, I hope the book can be read by a variety of people for diverse reasons. I hope it will be helpful to beginning college teachers who (as I was in the first years of my career) are wondering how they are going to get through the next day, much less the rest of the semester. I hope that teachers who are expert in their subject matter but who have not really thought much about how to set up classrooms, develop curricula, and vary instructional modalities to help students learn will find practical information about how to create these dynamics. I hope that relatively experienced teachers who are caught in dilemmas they seem to encounter again and again will find insights or suggestions on how to respond to these situations.

I hope, too, that readers who have been teaching for a long time and suffer from a sense of torpor or routine will find something to renew them and remind them why they became college teachers in the first place. Finally, I hope that teachers everywhere who are dogged by the suspicion that they fall woefully short of being the calm, controlled, skilled orchestrators of learning spoken about on faculty days (and featured in texts on teaching) will feel reassured by the common experience I have depicted.

Overview of the Contents

The book begins with a chapter on the experience of teaching that emphasizes its chaotic unpredictability and the ways this is viscerally experienced. I argue that skillful teaching resembles a kind of contextually informed “muddling through” classroom experience that involves our negotiating moments of surprise as we grow into our own truth about the realities we face. Chapter 2 explores the four core assumptions that inform the book: that skillful teaching boils down to whatever helps students learn, that the best teachers adopt a critically reflective stance toward their practice, that the most important knowledge we need to

do good work is an awareness of how students are experiencing their learning and our teaching, and that we should always aim to treat students as adults. Chapter 3 explores the third assumption regarding the need to get inside students' heads in more depth through an examination of various classroom research approaches, particularly the classroom Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ).

Chapter 4 continues the review of college learning through students' eyes by considering the two characteristics of teachers that students say they value the most—credibility and authenticity. Specific examples of each of these characteristics are given so that readers can recognize when they are displaying them in their own practice so that they can be authoritative allies. In Chapter 5 I explore the typical emotional rhythms of student learning and how teachers can respond to these. Here I point to the similarities in the way teachers, as well as their students, experience college classrooms.

Chapters 6 through 11 focus on some of the practices most common to college teaching across disciplines and levels. These are lecturing (Chapter 6), discussion (Chapter 7), teaching in diverse classrooms (Chapter 8), teaching about racism (Chapter 9), integrating elements of play and creativity (Chapter 10), and teaching in teams (Chapter 11). In all these chapters I try to give examples of specific classroom exercises that will be helpful and to provide advice on when to judge which of these are most appropriate.

Chapter 12 considers how to help students think more critically, something I view as the overarching project of higher education. Teaching in online settings is the focus of Chapter 13, where I argue that despite the stereotype of online learning as disembodied and passive, many of the same principles that animate face-to-face classrooms apply in cyberspace. How to give helpful evaluations to students, and the elements these comprise, are considered in Chapter 14. After reviewing practices of effective assessment I then move to consider how teachers can encourage students to take more responsibility for their learning in Chapter 15.

Chapters 16 and 17 analyze the thorny question of why students resist learning that we consider to be in their best interests and how to respond to this push back. I consider the most common reasons that students display resistance and provide guidance on how to manage this so it does not get out of control and sabotage the course. I used to have a chapter titled *Overcoming Resistance* in the first edition. Now I understand better that it often cannot be overcome, only managed more effectively.

How we exercise our power as teachers is another new chapter. Here, in Chapter 18, I lay out the ubiquity of power dynamics in college classrooms and recount how students decide that we have exercised our power justifiably. The theme of power continues in Chapter 19 as I examine the ways in which political factors—both inside and outside college—affect the practice of teaching. I argue that teaching is an inherently political activity through which people learn how to treat each other democratically or autocratically. I also offer some strategies for political survival.

The final chapter examines how we can survive the emotional roller coaster of life in the college classroom. It contains 16 maxims of skillful teaching that summarize the main themes that emerge in the previous chapters.

Acknowledgments

My greatest acknowledgment must go to those various college teachers who have come up to me at conferences and workshops to tell me how useful they found earlier editions of this book. They provided the emotional impetus for me to write this third edition.

I know that thanks to editors often appear ritualistic but I hope that my gratitude for David Brightman's supportive yet critical perspective is read as genuine. As always, David was full of useful ideas and provocative questions that helped me reshape the third edition of this book. Over the years he has constantly championed student-centered approaches and helped all the authors he's worked with at Jossey-Bass improve their ability to communicate about theoretically informed practice. He will be missed as an editor, but our friendship will continue.

The University of St. Thomas and, in particular, my boss Dr. Sue Huber, have been unfailingly generous in providing me with all kinds of resources to support my writing. Finally, I would also like to thank the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education for allowing me to use the parts of Chapter 8 that were first published in the journal *Adult Learning*.

About the Author

The father of Molly and Colin and the husband of Kim, Stephen D. Brookfield is currently the John Ireland Endowed Chair at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota. Prior to moving to Minnesota, he spent 10 years as professor in the Department of Higher and Adult Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he is still adjunct professor.

Stephen received his B.A. degree (1970) from Coventry University in modern studies, his M.A. degree (1974) from the University of Reading in sociology, and his Ph.D. degree (1980) from the University of Leicester in adult education. He also holds a postgraduate diploma (1971) from the University of London, Chelsea College, in modern social and cultural studies and a postgraduate diploma (1977) from the University of Nottingham in adult education. He holds three honorary doctor of letters degree from the University System of New Hampshire (1991), Concordia University, St. Paul (2003), and Muhlenberg College (2009) for his contributions to adult education practice.

He began his teaching career in 1970 and has held appointments at colleges of further, technical, adult, and higher education in the United Kingdom and at universities in Canada (University of British Columbia) and the United States (Columbia University, Teachers College, and the University of St. Thomas). In 1989 he was Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Technical and Adult

Teacher Education in what is now the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. In 2002 he was Visiting Professor at Harvard University Graduate School of Education. In 2003–2004 he was the Helen Le Baron Hilton Chair at Iowa State University. He has run numerous workshops on teaching, adult learning, and critical thinking around the world and delivered many keynote addresses at regional, national, and international education conferences. In 2001 he received the Leadership Award from the Association for Continuing Higher Education (ACHE) for “extraordinary contributions to the general field of continuing education on a national and international level.” In 2008 he was also awarded the Morris T. Keeton Award of the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning for “significant contributions to adult and experiential learning.” In 2009 he was inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. He is currently the John Ireland Endowed Chair in Education at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis-St. Paul, where in 2008 he won the university’s Diversity in Teaching and Research Award and the John Ireland Teaching and Scholarship Award.

Stephen is a six time winner of the Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education: in 1986 for his book *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning: A Comprehensive Analysis of Principles and Effective Practices*, in 1989 for *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting*, in 1996 for *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, in 2005 for *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching*, in 2011 for *Radicalizing Learning: Adult Education for a Just Society* (with John Holst), and in 2012 for *Teaching Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Challenge Their Assumptions*. *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* also won the 1986 Imogene E. Okes Award for Outstanding Research in Adult Education. These awards were all presented by the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. The first edition of *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*

(2nd ed. 2005), which he co-authored with Stephen Preskill, was a 1999 Critics Choice of the Educational Studies Association. His text *Powerful Techniques for Teaching Adults* (2013) won the 2013 Phillip E. Frandson Award for Literature in Continuing Higher Education from the University Professional and Continuing Education Association. His other books are *Adult Learners*, *Adult Education and the Community* (1984), *Self-Directed Learning: From Theory to Practice* (1985), *Learning Democracy: Eduard Lindeman on Adult Education and Social Change* (1987), *Training Educators of Adults: The Theory and Practice of Graduate Adult Education* (1988), *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust and Responsiveness in the Classroom* (2nd. ed. 2006), *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts: Promises and Contradictions* (co-edited with Mary Hess, 2008), *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice* (co-authored with Stephen Preskill, 2008), *Handbook of Race and Adult Education: A Resource for Dialogue on Racism* (co-edited with Vanessa Sheared, Juanita Johnson Bailey, Scipio A.J. Colin III, and Elizabeth Peterson, 2010), and *Engaging Imagination: Helping Students Become Creative and Reflective Thinkers* (co-authored with Alison James).

The Skillful Teacher

Experiencing Teaching

Passion, hope, doubt, fear, exhilaration, weariness, collegue-ship, loneliness, glorious defeats, hollow victories, and, above all, the certainties of surprise and ambiguity; how on earth can a single word or phrase begin to capture the multilayered complexity of what it feels like to teach? Today's college classrooms are more diverse than ever before, and the explosion of online learning and social media has thrown traditional conceptions of college teaching out of the window. The truth is teaching is a gloriously messy pursuit in which shock, contradiction, and risk are endemic. Our lives as teachers often boil down to our best attempts to muddle through the complex contexts and configurations that our classrooms represent.

Muddling Through as the Honorable Response to Uncertainty

Muddling through a situation sounds like something you do before you've learned the truly professional response to it. It seems random, uncoordinated, and not a little amateurish. But muddling through should not be thought of as haphazard, nor as dishonorable. Muddling through is about all you can do when no clear guidelines exist to help you deal with unexpected contingencies. When a racially motivated fistfight broke out on my second day of community college teaching all I could do was to try and muddle through. No course I had taken had put me in a simulation or role-play where I had the chance to break up an imagined classroom fight, so I was clueless to

know how to respond. Somehow (I don't remember how) I managed to calm things down enough to finish the class. And for whatever reason, I had no more fights break out in class that year.

As we muddle through different teaching contexts we usually draw on insights and intuitions borne of experience. Sometimes these serve us well, but sometimes we quickly realize their limitations. For example, when something that worked wonderfully in class last semester only serves to provoke anger or confusion in students this time around, the highly situational nature of teaching is underscored. Administrators and politicians don't like to hear that teaching is situational. They need to believe that standardized indicators of good teaching exist that can be proven to be reliable and valid across multiple contexts. I have spent my life in such systems and, while they may make the administrative task of assigning annual scores to a teacher's performance easier, any correlation they have with an accurate assessment of what actually goes on in a classroom is often purely coincidental.

As you can see from the paragraph above, this is going to be an opinionated, some would say polemical, book. But the skepticism expressed above is not just my opinion. Studies of teachers' lives (Preskill and Jacobvitz, 2000; Mattos, 2009) indicate how teachers muddle through their careers. They report their work to be highly emotional and bafflingly chaotic. Career counselors and popular films may portray teachers as transformative heroes skillfully navigating classroom dilemmas to empower previously skeptical students, but actual teacher narratives (Harbon and Moloney, 2013; Shadiow, 2013) emphasize much more how teaching is riddled with irresolvable dilemmas and complex uncertainties.

Some of these dilemmas, such as how to strike the right balance between being supportive to students and challenging them with tasks they resist, or how to create activities that simultaneously address all learning styles and racial traditions in a culturally and academically diverse classroom, exist in any contemporary institution. But many of these pedagogic dilemmas are compounded by