



Class Not Dismissed: Reflections on Undergraduate Education and Teaching the Liberal Arts

Aveni, Anthony
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Book Review

Tags: changes in higher education | higher education | undergraduate education

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Entering his career as a high-flying yet narrowly trained graduate researcher in astronomy, Aveni's engagement with students in his discipline and in the interdisciplinary context of liberal arts education has seen his own research flourish -- as indicated by his full title as Russell Colgate Distinguished Professor of Astronomy, Anthropology, and Native American Studies at Colgate University. That this flourishing has been driven by continually seeking ways to entice his students to enjoy and collaborate in learning and research, rather than by dint of solely private endeavor against the grain of his teaching commitments, is marvelously set out in his tales of fieldtrips, flunked comet observations, and explosive co-teaching assignments.

Teachers of religion and theology may find themselves under increasing pressure to justify their place in the liberal arts context. Aveni shows clearly how imagination and good teaching practices can both competitively enhance a discipline's standing and co-operatively benefit collegial efforts in other areas. My particular interest in the book arises from the challenge of leading general education redesign efforts at an institution where religion and theology are deeply cherished. I have needed to imagine how other disciplines can enrich my teaching of theology as integral to a liberal arts education. Aveni, with a lifetime of experience, has been helpful both practically and philosophically as I approach my local task. For example, where we emphasize interdisciplinary integration with some co-teaching and team teaching, Aveni looks at those arrangements as more beneficial when disintegrative -- that is, when conflict between teachers generates a learning opportunity for students.

Those not yet inducted to the professional discourse on general education and the liberal arts will find this text a winsome entry, shorn as it is of the social science research-speak that can clog the fluency of that vital conversation. Aveni is a dedicated practitioner, demonstrating in his own prose the liberal arts skills that should be demanded even of those in STEM.

Aveni questions the commodification of education in his last full chapter: "Education just isn't a commodity, and I don't think students in the midst of a classroom experience can fully judge its value" (175). He is, at the same time, also able to take the long view on teaching evaluations to recognize their relative worth. He is not a traditionalist in the sense of insisting on a classical western canon, claiming that its proponents, such as Allan Bloom, are "many whose backgrounds demonstrate a profound lack of inquiry into cultural ideals other than their own" (183). Readers will be rewarded with this kind of punchy delivery that invites learning by agreement or disagreement, but not through over-complication and obfuscation. Aveni writes as a generous peer. He is quick to recognize the importance of senior mentors, alongside mundane realities of budgetary constraints, innovative grant-seeking, and teaching driven by research. Throughout, the author's wit and humor stand out, but readers will be struck most of all by his care for his students.

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