



Tim Gunn: The Natty Professor: A Master Class on Mentoring, Motivating, and Making It Work!

Gunn, Tim, with Calhoun, Ada
Gallery Books, 2015

Book Review

Tags: eaching principles | mentoring | teaching philosophy

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We are used to seeing Tim Gunn as the mentor on *Project Runway*, forgetting that Gunn is a teacher and chair at The New School's Parsons School of Design where he also was a dean. *The Natty Professor* is part memoir, part reflection in which Gunn explains his T.E.A.C.H. philosophy, which involves:

Truth-telling: "Injecting reality into situations" (xviii) . . . "because the world certainly will" (xvii).

Empathy: Compassionate understanding of students' experiences (75). Teachers evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each student to help her become who *she* is as a thinker, not to shape a "mini-me."

Asking: Presenting insightful, tough questions, but also listening to help students ask and translate questions into practical application. For Gunn, good questions are the key to teaching, signaling creative curiosity. Questions also lead to cultivating and being in community: locating oneself where one is so as to open new paths in learning (178). Gunn urges us to keep curiosity supple by reading, traveling, and going, for example, to museums.

Cheerleading: Supporting our students and helping them achieve their visions, even if we would do things otherwise (189); but also

Hoping for the Best: Letting go because, in the end, it is up to them (223). Teachers cannot do the work for students. Gunn discusses difficult issues here, like discipline and grades.

Gunn explains his principles through positive experiences, as well as through problems that teachers face, from making sure students read the syllabus to curriculum development. He also analyzes bad teaching: the bullies, the authority abusers, and the “drones,” the burnt-out and bored (156), saying that if you do not love it, leave. Interspersed through the book are testimonies from a variety of people about their most influential teachers.

Three elements struck me strongly. First, perhaps because his is partly a practical field, Gunn offers powerful insights about mentoring, helping a student to reach her vision (13), which uses creatively, and sometimes transgressively, the skills and knowledge we teach. Second, Gunn cannot abide “preciousness.” Work will be shared with audiences: students become professionals in the world. Finally, Gunn argues that all and a variety of knowledge is important because, “Nothing . . . is ever wasted” (xv). Knowing generates capacities to adapt and to draw on knowledge so as to work effectively with challenges at hand. This is a good response to those who question the humanities’ demands for reading and writing with care within traditions and conventions. Diversity is also knowledge, serving us all as we work with a variety of persons, experience their knowledge and practices, and learn from them.

I will watch Tim Gunn on *Project Runway* and *Under the Gunn* differently after reading his book. He is a wise master teacher in love with all classrooms. “Love your work!” above all (245). Gunn, as an administrator, teacher, and human being has much to teach us. I will be stealing shamelessly from his wisdom.

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