



## Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education: A Practical Introduction

Martínez-Alemán, Ana M.; Pusser, Brian, and Bensimon, Estela Mara, eds.  
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015

### Book Review

Tags: active learning | critical theories | critically reflective teaching | teaching for transformation

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The goal of the contributors to *Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education* is to apply critical theories to the study of higher education which, they insist, “has only begun to develop research using such essential approaches as critical feminist theories, critical race theories, critical discourse analysis, state theoretical approaches, or theories of power and marginalization.” Added to this genuine concern is the scarcity of published material “addressing key topics in higher education that are central to critical work elsewhere in the social sciences” (5). To meet this need, they marshal “critical theories, models, and research tools with a critical vision of the central challenges facing postsecondary researchers” hoping to shape future “scholars and scholarship in higher education” (5). They are convinced that these critical tools will “provide policymakers, the public, and institutional actors clear, reasonable, and authoritative information about higher education as it is experienced in a democracy” (1). The result is a fine compilation of well-written essays for teachers and researchers to adopt and exercise their critical edge with a view to innovating their teaching pedagogies and research.

The vision Martínez-Ahlemán, Pusser, and Bensimon have is to ensure a sustained exercise of critical theory in the service of humanity, namely “for understanding politics and policy making in higher education” (5). They carry their readers through fifteen intriguing arguments critically testing theory against lived experiences filled with autobiographical elements that share the same thread – an abiding concern and determination to ensure that justice and equity are exercised in higher education. After all, critical theory came into being for this purpose as exemplified in feminist criticism, critical race theory, and other critical studies

dealing with various dimensions of human life such as marginalization, economic disparity, and power differential. Simply stated, things are not the way they seem and something must be done even if it might be subversive.

This volume is, indeed, “long overdue” (5) as it provides salient insights on how to critically navigate the host of complex and challenging issues facing higher education. These dynamic tensions inherent in higher education include: areas of scholarship and lived experience, power differential, critical historiography, the making of globalization, policymaking, race, equity, opportunities, and institutional change, and so on. Quite frankly, this book is a gem with a delicate vision to motivate scholars and teachers alike to engage in the noble – yet difficult – task of effecting change, especially the kind of transformation that advocates justice and nurtures equity in higher education. Educators and researchers may strive to embody and diligently exercise its content in their classrooms or writing projects because of its timely and urgent call for action. In other words, justice and equity matter (311).

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