Fragile Learning: The Influence of Anxiety

Mathew, David
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Book Review

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David Mathew introduces *Fragile Learning: The Influence of Anxiety* as a "book about barriers to learning." He adds: "as a selection of what grew to be an interrelated body of published papers, *Fragile Learning* asks the reader to consider a wide variety of factors that might test a learner's resilience or make the process of learning precarious and problematic." These obstacles include "technology, environment, culture, age, disease, and incarceration. . . The book examines anxiety – both learner anxiety and educator anxiety – as both an inevitable and important pedagogic tool" (xv).

In the chapters of the book, Mathew offers case studies of "fragile learners": learners for whom obstacles like those presented above threaten to derail the learning process entirely. However, the definition of learner and learning is extremely broad, encompassing incarcerated youth engaged in face-to-face learning, diverse learners in online courses, a colleague struggling with physical pain, and workers in a horse stable. The wide range of subjects reminds us that many human behaviors, including academic study, work, and navigation of the medical system, are all examples of learning. However, the diversity of subjects dilutes the degree to which Mathew's insights are useful for educators engaged with learning in a more traditional sense.

While the range of subjects is very broad, Mathew's fundamental approach is consistent. In each case, he explores the psychological dimensions of the learners' experiences and their affects on the learners' behavior. For example, one case study centers on an adult student in an online course who was situated in a traditional cultural context in which age, maleness, and social status were privileged categories. Mathews describes how assuming the role of student,

in a context in which these factors did not automatically convey status or demand respect, was challenging and anxiety-producing for the student. This anxiety was an obstacle to his learning. In another essay, Mathew and his colleague, Susan Sapsed, describe the psychological effects of Sapsed's ongoing experience of physical pain and unsuccessful medical treatment and the ways in which both the physical and psychic pain impacted her professional and personal life. In his discussions of the cases, Mathew's brings first-person accounts of the learners' experiences or his observations of them into conversation with psychoanalytic theory, primarily, but not exclusively, about anxiety.

In the short space of the essays, the introduction of psychoanalytic theory serves to reframe the individual cases as examples of more general psychological experiences. In some of the essays, Mathew describes or proposes pedagogical approaches that help learners tolerate and address the obstacles to their learning. In keeping with his psychoanalytic orientation, the approaches he advocates cast the educator in a therapeutic role – either as pastoral caregiver or as an object of transference for the fragile learner. Mathew's fundamental argument is an important one. Educators and educational systems need to be attentive to the ways in which the life experiences of many learners catalyze a range of psychological conditions, including anxiety, low self-esteem, inability to trust, and depression, that are often significant obstacles to learning. A psychoanalytic perspective of these obstacles can be a useful element in designing systemic and individual pedagogical supports for these learners. However, the anthological format of the book, and Mathew's tendency to focus more on the psychoanalytic theory in itself rather than on the cases he presents limit the utility of the book for practitioners dedicated to supporting fragile learners in educational settings.

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