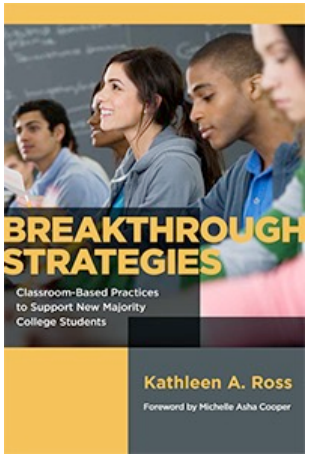

Breakthrough Strategies: Classroom-Based Practices to Support New Majority College Students

Ross, Kathleen A.
Harvard Education Publishing Group, 2016

Book Review

Tags: classroom power and privilege | racial and ethnic diversity | student empowerment

Reviewed by: William McDonald
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This book is about preparing for a future already dawning on North American college campuses, a future belonging to “New Majority” (NM) students. Ross describes NM students as Latino/a, African-American, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, first generation, and low income. Evidence of NM students is statistically demonstrable, as with the 50% rise of Pell Grant applicants between 2002-13. Demographic surges suggest a “majority-minority” U.S. by 2050. These students often have an educational disadvantage, met in some places with "bridge programs" or other efforts to bolster their success. But is more needed? Are faculty aware and equipped enough to serve NM students, or will faculty continue to be befuddled when students do not speak up in class or react to assignments and grades in unexpected ways? This book addresses these issues by introducing professors to NM students so that they can better understand the cultural cues and expectations these students bring.

Part I, "Strategies for Engagement," assesses ways of keeping students engaged, but with special attention to issues NM students face. Chapters begin with classroom vignettes that set up the problem the chapter addresses. Students may disengage because of “stereotype threat,” a socio-psychological phenomenon described in chapter four. Professors best confront this stereotype by bolstering self-confidence while pushing students to engage subject matter more deeply. Students are reluctant to ask questions in class not because they are uninterested, but because they fear sounding ignorant or come with cultural traditions of deference that discourage public questioning. This mismatch of expectations between teacher and students can be confronted through strategies presented in chapter five.

Taken for granted as a privileged space with its own practices, the college classroom is strange new territory for NM students. Six chapters in parts II and III introduce strategies that build inclusion and confidence. For instance, NM students benefit from classroom cultures built around interdependence and teamwork rather than individual achievement, which can be perceived as selfish and disloyal in some minority communities. Journaling is another strategy that invites NM students to deeper reflection on a subject and builds connection with the instructor. It helps to overcome the assumption that learning is simply mastery of information delivered through lectures, as opposed to personal discovery and evaluation.

Journaling is an important ingredient in the wider purpose of creating leaders for minority communities who produce personal observations, share insights, and opinions with confidence, contributions which are valuable not only for minority communities but also for the wider society in which they will participate. NM students will graduate and enter a workforce where they will continue to face debilitating stereotypes (the final chapter's opening vignette is about Gabriela, a Latina architecture student who faced negative stereotyping on her first day). College classrooms should be spaces of empowerment for these students so they can begin building a professional identity during their educational experience. Professors can facilitate this with frank discussions of stereotypes NM students will face, by sharing stories of role models, and by cultivating good practices in communication and self-presentation.

This book will sensitize faculty to the needs of this growing part of the student body. However, much of the information is applicable to students from all backgrounds, and will improve college teaching for all involved.

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