Book Review

Teach them to challenge authority: Educating for healthy societies

Prince Jr, Gregory S.

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Teach Them to Challenge Authority: Educating for Healthy Societies was published in 2008 and is written by Gregory S. Prince, Jr, who is the recent past president of Hampshire College and also former dean at Dartmouth. In his book, Prince advocates the importance of the active and engaged university student, because ‘engagement is the foundation for teaching students how to challenge authority in constructive and appropriate ways’ (p. xix). Prince states students should challenge authority in the classroom because ‘challenging authority is important to the long-term health of a society’ (p. xvi) and defines education as ‘the act of purposefully engaging someone through the use of knowledge, experience or values; to build healthy communities’ (p. 35).

The book is broken into three parts. Part 1, *Two Views of Education*, discusses the differences between the engaged versus the neutral university. In part 2, *Mirrors for America*, Prince explores five examples of overseas

universities that have challenged traditional authority and that embody the author’s definition of engaged universities. Part 3, *The Engaged University*, states how to best educate students: through classroom engagement.

The book’s core issue is the author’s commitment to liberal education, which seeks ‘to develop a student’s capacity for purposeful critical thought and to enrich the inner self while producing a constructive, engaged citizen or communal self’ (p. 42). Prince explores this concept anecdotally through his experience as a university president and through his involvement with other university administrators and students. Through storytelling and reflection, Prince stresses the importance of university administrators encouraging students to challenge professors in the classroom. Prince believes students are often silenced or discouraged from expressing their views in the classroom or in an educational context; he believes that

‘students need to be challenged, not protected’ (p. 203) through active learning.

Prince explores the dangers of neutrality within a university setting. ‘If professors, in pursuit of the goal of critical thinking, put forth their own opinions, they would unduly influence, if not intimidate or indoctrinate, their students’ (p. 15). Furthermore, ‘If developing critical thinking is part of the stated mission, then presenting a range of material unfettered by faculty bias should be required’ (p. 53).

Prince’s core educational values may be summarized by his *Principles of Discourse*, which weave throughout the book. They are: ‘Value truth; accept responsibility; listen openly; welcome evaluation and accept and encourage disagreement and criticism; refuse to reduce disagreement to personal attack; value civility; embrace that ends cannot justify means to violate the *Principles* (p.16).’ Prince developed the *Principles* based on his years serving as a university administrator.

Prince’s thesis is clear: it is of paramount importance to create active, engaged students who are willing to challenge authority outside the classroom in order to create a better society. His methodology is purely anecdotal. His book reads like a memoir, serving as a culmination of his career, as it reflects upon the values he holds in utmost importance.

At times repetitive, the author’s points are driven home thoroughly through his cross-cultural examination of overseas students who have defied authority in defense of their beliefs for justice. Additionally, he presents tales

of student rallies at Prince’s own Hampshire campus that he did not support, but as university president, he accepted the means in which the students garnered attention for the subject matter. To the author’s discredit, there were passages in the book that seemed arrogant, and I questioned the necessity of their conclusion.

Teach Them to Challenge Authority is well written in a familiar tone that makes for an enjoyable read. It is clearly organized into the three aforementioned parts, each part building Prince’s case through story telling. Prince is qualified in his opinions based upon his 40 years in the profession. He is passionate about students and puts implicit value on their contributions to society and the way in which they approach controversial issues.

Prince’s goal is to get the attention of neutral professors who claim to be pro-liberal education, but who, in the classroom, remain silent on their opinions. He envisions an educational policy of advocacy and engagement – students pushing professors. I believe this is a valuable contribution and a worthy educational cause because, as Prince states, ‘as the world fights those who use violence to advance their agenda, engagement, not neutrality, is needed in our educational systems’ (p. 23).

I would recommend this book to any emerging professor seeking classroom methods, in addition to any university administrator looking to broaden the perspective within his or her classroom walls or campus. Any higher education administrator can learn valuable lessons from Prince’s vast experience that he translates into

his book. Although the methodology did not involve a mathematical sample or scientific data collection, the lessons Prince imparts are wise. I agree with Prince's end goal of creating more

educated societies through inquisitive students and nudging professors.

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