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Book review. Brookfield, Stephen D., Rudolph, Jürgen & Tan, Shannon (2024). *Teaching well: Understanding key dynamics of learning-centre classrooms*. Routledge.

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Teachers and the teaching profession have unquestionably been challenged in recent years. First by a global pandemic that temporarily replaced the intimacy and immediacy of the physical classroom with a technology-mediated learning environment. And second, by the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence that has challenged authenticity and trust in teaching and learning. 'Teaching well' is, therefore, a timely refocus on the elementary and essential questions – what is it to teach well, and how do we teach well?

'Teaching well' is not an effort to outline a normative set of prescriptions for achieving classroom 'nirvana'. Nor is it an abstract, theoretical exchange with limited practical utility. Instead, it seeks to explore the dynamics of the learning-centred classroom while bridging key theoretical concepts with practical teaching insights.

'Teaching well' is authored by Dr Jürgen Rudolph (Chief Editor of this journal), Ms Shannon Tan (Manager of this journal) and Professor Stephen Brookfield (Distinguished Scholar at Antioch University, Adjunct Professor at Teacher's College, Columbia University and Professor Emeritus at the University of St Thomas, USA), and takes the novel form of a series of conversations built around thirteen major questions. Rudolph and Tan spent over six months interviewing Brookfield over 14 interviews, each one lasting some thirty hours. Their combined efforts have resulted in a highly accessible text that is both compelling and enjoyable to read.

A real strength of 'interview-style' formats such as this is their ability to distil decades of accumulated expertise and wisdom and present this in a way that is easily digested and understood. In this case, Rudolph and Tan, like skilled sommeliers, tap into the bountiful richness of Professor Brookfield's extraordinary insights and expertise and serve this up in a delicious 'flight' of thirteen chapters.



## TEACHING WELL

UNDERSTANDING KEY DYNAMICS OF  
LEARNING-CENTERED CLASSROOMS

STEPHEN D. BROOKFIELD,  
JÜRGEN RUDOLPH, AND SHANNON TAN



These chapters include:

1. What does it mean to teach well?
2. How do our experiences as students frame our teachings?
3. How do we do learning-centred teaching?
4. How do we deal with classroom and self-sabotage?
5. How does power show up in classrooms?
6. How do we democratise classrooms?
7. How do we promote good discussions?
8. Teaching critical thinking
9. How do we teach about race?
10. How can we become critically reflective teachers?
11. How can we enact the power of modelling?
12. How do we teach well as leaders?
13. How do we learn and grow as teachers over a career?

As Rudolph and Tan explain, the questions that became the themes of the chapters are also those that have repeatedly surfaced at the hundreds of teacher development workshops that Brookfield has conducted over his long and illustrious career. It is little wonder, then, that what emerges in the narrative are long-considered and studied responses, thick with Brookfield's personal history and the humility with which he brings to his subject.

What is especially striking about the book is the portrait that emerges of Brookfield himself and the way in which this provides a kind of hopeful reassurance to the intended audience. Here is an internationally renowned scholar who has dedicated his life to teaching, and yet he candidly reveals his struggles as a student, his insecurities and the strong 'imposter syndrome' he has experienced. Unquestionably, this will resonate with many teachers and encourage those teachers who may be experiencing similar anxieties and self-doubt. Indeed, Brookfield notes that these personal struggles are a useful resource for teachers as they better enable them to understand and help students with similar challenges.

What I really value about *'Teaching well'* is the way in which it addresses what might be considered the subtle nuances of classroom dynamics. For instance, there is a thoughtful consideration of 'how it sounds to teach well', the critical importance of context and, importantly, how good teachers make many procedural decisions to account for variations in context. Additionally, the book contains a wealth of practical tips and practices for managing classroom dynamics, including how to identify student learning challenges, deal with sensitive discussion topics, anonymous feedback mechanisms, and promote productive discussions on how to address 'sabotage' in a classroom setting.

A particular strength of the book is the way in which the conversations touch on and discuss key theoretical concepts – for example, Foucault's contributions to our understanding of power are discussed in relation to the way in which power 'shows up' in classrooms. This fusion of the theoretical with the lived experience of teaching is helpful. For readers who may not be familiar with Foucault's work, consumption of the complex ideas expressed may prove challenging. On the other hand, these readers may be inspired to read more of Foucault and some of the other works of the venerated theoreticians that are mentioned throughout the book.

Following the work and life story of Professor Brookfield inevitably means not shying away from the more difficult and potentially controversial topics. There is, for example, a deep exploration of the issue of race and racism in higher education, which moves from how we might teach about race to the silencing of Critical Race Theory and managing racism in the classroom.

There is much to be admired about *'Teaching well'*, from the accessibility of its conversationally-driven narrative to the juxtaposition of practical teaching ideas with thoughtful consideration of established pedagogical theory. For teachers at any level of education, the book offers unique access to the considerable wisdom of Professor Brookfield on a broad range of topics skilfully presented by Rudolph and Tan. Teachers will also discover, I'm sure (as I did), something more than just a guidebook for teaching well. The book additionally offers a compass for how teachers themselves might wish to develop and manage their careers as critically reflective professionals. *'Teaching well'* is, therefore, a book that every teacher would do well to read and have close to them as they progress in their careers.

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