

## Book Review

**Sid Brown. *A Buddhist in the Classroom*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008.**

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Sid Brown's *A Buddhist in the Classroom* delves deep into "the intimacy of teaching" (xi), a term encompassing the web of activities, goals, and personalities that comprise any classroom. Because Brown is not only a Buddhist, but a religious studies professor, readers of *CEA Forum* will have to particularize Brown's thoughts for the English classroom. However, *A Buddhist in the Classroom* contains a useful introduction to Buddhism and its practical application as equipment for the social, emotional, and interpersonal aspects of teaching. Additionally, the book is filled with extended narratives of active learning and critical thinking activities based upon Buddhist precepts, and the book is rife with stories of resistant students, mildly burnt-out instructors, and frustrated lesson plans salvaged over time through Brown's Buddhist strategies.

Taken together, these qualities make the book a potential addition to any pedagogy or practicum course. However, the book's organizational structure and framing of university instruction through Buddhist teachings may limit the effectiveness of the book for both content and pedagogy seminars. The book is loaded with interesting conversation, but the book engages with no particular ongoing academic conversation, and Brown does not articulate how his understanding or application of Buddhist practices specifically improves upon or critiques

current active, critical, or student-centered learning. This leaves much of his advice bordering on the anecdotal, even if clearly explained and contextualized through his own experience.

The book is organized around nine chapters ranging from the typical—community in the classroom, student engagement, and gender in the classroom—to the atypical—creativity, meditational exercises in the classroom, motivating students, and not being in the mood to teach, among others. The book is most engaging when it details promising Buddhist practices that are not adopted into our current teaching methods, when offering new strategies for the intangibles of teaching, and when building critical exercises based upon empathy, role-playing, and experiential learning.

The introduction, “In the Event of a Crash Landing,” narrates Brown’s initial foray into Buddhist teaching practices in a course entitled “Buddhism and the Environment.” The chapter also introduces a primary goal of the book: “But if learning is the issue, then it can’t just be about student learning. [...] Which requires, I think, that the professor explore, too. And breathe” (12). This primary goal, revitalizing one’s self for teaching effectiveness, is a constant strength of the book. I found Brown’s narrative and empathetic viewpoint similar to the writing of bell hooks writing on masculinity and love. Brown’s writing, both academic and spiritual, continually circles back to a need for instructors to explore not their subject matter, but their Self in Daily Life and its effect upon their communication and dynamic with students.

Chapter Two, “Lie Until It’s True: Attention in the Classroom,” begins with Brown’s conversion to Buddhism in the monasteries of Asia. Here, in a rhetorical strategy that marks each remaining chapter of the book, Brown opens up with a lesson from his own life or the Buddha’s life, which is followed by application of the lesson to his classroom.

This format works well throughout the book, but one problem that will bother most instructors appears early. Brown, a highly motivated young man grown to college professor, reflects upon himself as the average U.S. undergraduate. However, both his openness to new forms of spiritual and academic study and his burgeoning professorial intellect and curiosity make Brown different than most college students; yet Brown consistently recalls how his younger self used Buddhism successfully to navigate college. On a related note, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds do not inform the many students Brown sketches in his book. His designation of student resistance is, at best, individual and located in emotional resistance or a lack of reflection. I'd argue that the cultural or material grounds of such resistance are a deeper quagmire than Brown explores or admits. It is difficult to say whether this omission is based upon Brown's teacher-centeredness, Buddhism's philosophy of non-materialism, or English Studies' basis in cultural difference, but Brown's classroom description and application of Buddhism foregoes the context of students' complicated histories.

However, Brown delivers novel teaching advice when reminiscing about a colleague who was enraged after being ignored by her students. He observed her classroom performance, one where "what the teacher *said* and what she communicated with the rest of her body were opposites" (17). This simple observation begins a memorable discussion of how our own body language and unenergetic attempts to get a class's attention may undermine the actual classroom preparations in which we've invested our time. Equally compelling are Brown's ideas for using student annoyances with particular readings or with the education process to energize class activities, create student voice, and make visible the struggles of learning. Brown's "gripe sessions" add a variety of tools to one's teaching toolbox.

Chapter Two, "Community in the Classroom," offers potential classroom activities so simple that they may be invisible to us. Brown posits that "some teachers ignore students' social worlds, [...] but humans rightfully attend to the people around them" (33). This leads Brown to ask, "Why wouldn't teachers build in-class learning on this solid foundation of the need for friendship?" (33). Brown reminds us that human and community connection can be built by encouraging, rather than discouraging, friendships in the classroom. Brown uses simple protocols such as writing cards for sick students, having students make eye contact and call each other by name during discussion, and using positive social pressure to ease disruptive behavior. Brown illustrates through his experience how community can provide a warmer classroom environment for instructor and student.

Chapter Three discusses strong emotion and awareness in the classroom. One would expect a discussion of awareness to focus on students, but Brown focuses on instructors. He reminds a reader that if students aren't learning the course material, the instructor's methods may be part of the problem.

While the advice is certainly true, English faculty may not find Brown's advice groundbreaking. Brown recounts teachers stomping out of classrooms or canceling class because students haven't read properly, although the flaw is the teacher's assignment design or classroom management. Perhaps our colleagues outside of English do these things, but I have a feeling that the ubiquity of pedagogy seminars in English graduate studies erases major design and management problems. While Brown's advice is good advice, it may seem a reinvention of the wheel for *CEA Forum* readers. Also, because the book is relatively unengaged with educational

theory, Brown's general focus does not tend toward concrete solutions. Brown identifies the root of problems, but he offers no specific advice on assignment design or classroom management.

In Chapter Three, Brown discusses visualization, guided imagery, and meditation as means of student discovery. To demonstrate how out-of-bounds these practices are in the American culture and educational system, Brown details the outlawing of these practices in several states' K-12 curriculum because they may lead to "devil worship and mysticism" (69). Brown's conviction here is solid. He argues that students "routinely underestimate the power of their own minds" and "[b]ecause our students are culturally disadvantaged at using their minds these ways, we are all the more responsible for helping them learn how" (69). Brown's insights address the general field labeled creativity studies, and the congruent writing location seems to be invention/prewriting and revision. The remainder of the book is a similar mix of generic advice with stand out sections that address concepts of Buddhist practice not currently mirrored by literacy pedagogy.

*A Buddhist in the Classroom* is far less encyclopedic or catalogic than Ken Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do*, a book that Brown's book slightly resembles, albeit with Brown's increased focus on the emotional processes and interpersonal dynamics of teaching. *A Buddhist in the Classroom* falls short of English graduate seminar fare such as *Comp Tales*, *What To Expect When You're Expected to Teach*, and similar books that focus on the immediate, tactile, and reflective experience of teaching writing. Perhaps the book will offer greater insight for literature instructors, but having taught my share of literature courses, I'd suggest the book is limited to improving class discussion and enhancing in-class response to students. Instructors

seeking to improve their interpersonal relationships with students or reinvigorate their classroom presence will find the book most helpful.

How well does Buddhist pedagogy transfer to university writing instruction? As a Buddhist and writing professor, I want much of it to transfer for both professional and personal reasons. However, the fields of literacy and English education are rife with research, theory, and specific instructional methods that do far more than Buddhism to help teachers design courses and respond to students in meaningful and discipline-specific ways. Also, much of the interpersonal terrain covered by Brown has been well covered through forty years of composition research and theory. Indeed, *A Buddhist in the Classroom* is a rich read and offers gems of wisdom, but as with all gem hunting, there is much sifting to be done.