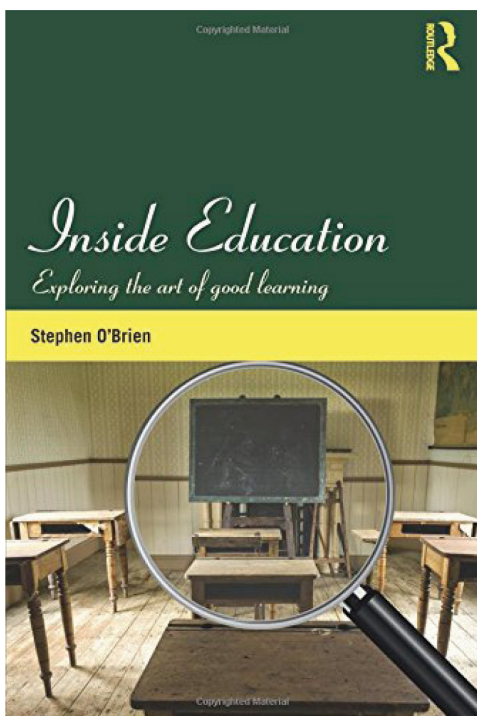


***Inside Education: Exploring the art of good learning*, by Stephen O'Brien**

Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, 194 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-52920-4 (pbk)



Every so often I come across the same conundrum: what is my line of work? Is it art, or is it science? Am I more of a teacher, or more of a researcher? What defines my practice, and what or who do I represent when I allegedly deliver knowledge or skill to my students? Working in the field of education, either as a teacher – an educator, I would rather say – or as a researcher, involves a great deal of self-reflexivity that asks for an even greater deal of empowerment for shaping an identity, not in the mundane sense of the word, but as a process of revealing the distortions that define our professional practice and our unsuccessful (most of the time) attempts to change them in order to meet what we perceive as the needs of learners. This is not to say that each one of us working in the field has not arrived at some fitting response. Yet we occasionally need an aegis somehow to safeguard us in our predicament. This is what Stephen O'Brien's book does. It responds in a most eloquent manner to what we – teachers and educationalists – really do. Because being inside

education is neither art nor science; it is both! As he so expressively puts it, 'Art is frequently seen as a reflection of identity, but identity is also reflected in the art we create' (22).

In this book, ethnographic in principle, yet cherishing a learning journey opulent in meanings and images, O'Brien creates what I would call a postmodern narrative of a series of learning events. These events unfurl as snapshots of a personal spiritual journey to learning in different times and spaces. As he himself articulates this, 'spirituality transcends rational functions to centre on the person of the teacher and the person of the learner, and their positional role in a more just world' (61).

Inside Education is the culmination of the challenges that all of us in the field of education (be it art or be it science) both revere and despise in our struggle to uncover and name the sources of our oppression. But this book does more than this: it explores a realm of possibilities for transforming our perspective towards learning, its means and its causes; it infuses literary and scientific elements of learning realities as if exposing the pages of the intimate diary of a sharp-eyed social researcher; it provides retrospections of large-scale historical events synchronized to the stories of local educational actors and initiatives; it reflects on the multiply conflictual roles that teachers and educators from Ireland to Brazil mantle as they 'move from one "reality" to an "other"' (150); it questions and criticises the current state of play of an education that 'becomes ever more commodified and compared, ... framed by market "interests"' (105). His arguments are as robust as they can get; they come from the field, after all. Not policy, not rhetoric; just the field.

The contribution of this book goes far beyond what the innocent reader may glimpse. It is a treatise on contemporary education that depicts some of its truths and many of its

fallacies. The arguments are written in what I would call 'borderless' language; the unfolded learning events could have taken place anywhere in today's world; from crisis-hit southern Europe to Australia. O'Brien capitalizes on his intensive experience as an educational thinker and insightful social researcher to organize the four parts of the book around issues of *identity* (engendered, personal and professional); *success* (both as reproduction of a neo-liberal system and its chronic alienation from learners' real needs, and as a social module of morality); *change* (as perspective transformation and as conscientization); and *power* (as hegemony and as control over the messages that teachers convey in their classrooms).

This book is not for everyone. It is not what many would call an easy read. This book is for the conscious reader; hence, the reflective teacher who prioritizes the 'whys' in his or her practice and stands critically against the multiple sources of neo-liberal oppression. Yet the narrative is so lavishly written that any higher education student who trains to be a teacher would easily discover in this book the 'Strength of character [that] follows through to one's teaching' (50).

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