

Review of *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*, by Cathy N. Davidson (New York: Basic Books, 2017). 318 pages, \$28.

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One of the highlights of this year's Modern Language Association Conference in New York City for me was a rock star panel consisting of Judith Butler, Angela Davis, Anthony Romero, and Cathy Davidson. I got to this Presidential Plenary on "States of Insecurity" very early and managed to snag a seat at what was ultimately a standing-room-only event with an audience of hundreds, despite the snow and storms outside. To be honest, I was mostly excited to be there as a fangirl of Judith Butler, whose work since *Gender Trouble* has influenced so much of my own scholarship. And while all of the panelists gave engaging and provocative talks, I left the panel most excited and energized by Cathy Davidson's presentation which she titled, "Schooled," based on her new book *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*.

What was most encouraging to me about Davidson's inclusion in this MLA plenary session was her focus on teaching, which has often felt like a secondary concern to me at MLA. In her book *The New Education*, Davidson emphasizes the importance of higher education as a place of transformation for students, making the role of the teaching in the academy a critical one. Tracing the evolution of the university from the seventeenth century through today, Davidson calls our attention to the reasons why many of the aspects of higher education we take for granted—graded assessment, stated student majors, and the expectation of faculty service and research in addition to teaching—were developed in the first place. As many of these fundamentals of the academy emerged as a result of the changing industrial economy of the nineteenth century, Davidson argues that our contemporary world has moved far beyond the nineteenth-century paradigms that the current university was designed for, and that it's past time for colleges and universities to evolve as well. In *The New Education*, Davidson outlines proposed changes in both theory and practice for higher education which she argues will better serve our students.

Davidson takes her title from an 1869 article for *The Atlantic Monthly* titled "The New Education" by Charles Eliot, a nineteenth-century "critique of existing forms of higher education

in America and a manifesto for the higher education revolution he would go on to lead in his forty-year reign as president of Harvard” (7). *The New Education* similarly functions as a manifesto for twenty-first-century higher education, examining how we got here, what the most pressing issues are, what solutions have been proposed to solve them, and what she sees as the most promising way forward.

I admit, I was dubious about her stated goals of completely restructuring and redesigning education, which she explains as:

demand[ing] institutional restructuring, a revolution in every classroom, curriculum, and assessment system. It means refocusing away from the passive student to the whole person learning new ways of thinking through problems with no easy solutions. It shifts the goal of college from fulfilling course and graduation requirements to learning for success in the world after college. (8-9)

However, Davidson’s subsequent arguments and calls for action are based not only on current scholarship of teaching and learning (“SOTL”) but also on her own experience in a broad range of higher education institutions. She has taught at a well-funded private university, a public, R-1 university, as well as in an international MOOC. And beyond these polemics, *The New Education* contains much that is insightful and immediately usable in the classroom.

For me, there are two important highlights of the book: her chapter on community college practices and her balanced approach to technology as a pedagogical tool. First, in her chapter “College for Everyone,” she argues that one of the most important changes that needs to happen in all four-year colleges and research universities is a shift to a community college mindset: “Whereas the research university puts its institutional reputation first, community college prioritizes student growth” (49). These differences lead to very different administrative priorities and teaching strategies. Davidson explains, “The infrastructure of the research university is based on exclusion, sorting, selecting, and ranking; the infrastructure of the community college is based on inclusion, remediating, improving, and offering first changes—and second, third, or however many are required for success” (50). And ultimately, “the task is not for the student to replicate the expertise of the professor but, rather, for the student to gain the basic literacies required to move ahead” (50). Indeed, Davidson’s focus on the importance of metacognitive pedagogical strategies mirrors much of my own approach to teaching. Certainly, Composition Studies has long focused on metacognition and student reflection in the classroom, but I’m interested in how we can more fully build in such activities in other kinds of courses as well.

I also appreciate Davidson’s balanced approach to technology in the classroom. In her chapter “Against Technophobia,” she encourages instructors to take a much more open approach to student use of smart phones and laptops in the classroom. In fact, she argues we should welcome them: “[W]e should allow devices in the classrooms more frequently than we now do because sustained, careful, critical practice with devices helps us use them better” (90). However, technology in the classroom requires more than simply giving students access to iPads or laptops. Rather, Davidson cautions that we must “think deeply about what the technology can do, what the students can learn with it and about it, and how devices can help students think together, remix one another’s ideas, iterate, respond, and contribute to an evolving whole” (90).

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She continues her measured approach to technology in the following chapter, “Against Technophilia.” In this chapter, Davidson gives an account of her experiencing overseeing a massive open online course (or “MOOC,” as they are commonly known) while on the faculty of Duke University, a program which involved thousands of students online around the world in one course on the history of higher education. Davidson was quite frank in her expression of her reservations about the experience. In addition to her issues with the business model of the MOOC, the experience was extremely demanding for her, even though she had a team of graduate students who were helping create, develop, and supervise the course along with her. Further, the costs of keeping up with the technology necessary not only for MOOCs but for face-to-face teaching needs keeps rising: “As funding sources continue to shrink, universities and colleges find they must keep up their technology infrastructure even while cutting faculty and course offerings. That’s a terrible trade-off. And it’s a trade-off that is crucial to consider as we design the new education” (121).

And ultimately, that’s the one aspect that’s missing from *The New Education*: how to fund (and enact) the significant changes for which she is advocating. Davidson herself has had great success hardwiring significant changes in the myriad institutions she has worked with, but she has no easy answers or magic bullets for instituting (or funding) the kinds of wide-sweeping changes she argues are critical for higher education to succeed. To be fair, in her chapter “Why College Costs So Much,” Davidson provides a clear explanation of why tuition costs have skyrocketed and advocates for serious change; however, she ultimately concludes that, “The United States has ended its era of strategic investment in its youth” (187), and that it will take both a renewed national support in higher education coupled with a new vision of how to provide this education to truly solve this problem, as well as prioritizing the kind of funding necessary to do so.

Nevertheless, there is plenty here that individual instructors, cohorts, or departments can implement without such significant structural changes. If for no other reason, this book is valuable for its two appendices: “Ten Tips for Getting the Most Out of Your College Experience” (which I plan to assign in my future English 1101 classes) and “Ten Tips for Transforming Any Classroom for Active, Student-Centered Learning,” some of which I have already tried out this semester. And I think that Davidson’s ultimate message is to provide encouragement for large-scale change through these much more small-scale, individual strategies. It is possible to enact change one classroom at a time.

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