Geeky Pedagogy: A Guide for Intellectuals, Introverts, and Nerds Who Want to Be Effective Teachers

By Jessamyn Neuhaus. (2019), 249 pages, ISBN:9781949199062. $24.55

Subject: How to Be a Better Teacher

Useful for: Useful for those who teach (particularly if you teach formally).

Format: Chapters (with overview conclusions for each), plus a glossary, notes, and index.

Reviewer's Comments:

A small note to begin this review: I enjoyed this book, and I'll recommend it to others interested in thinking about different ways to approach their teaching. But I must offer a word of warning. Neuhaus's cultural references, at least for those who don't fall into the same geek/nerd culture that she does (such as myself), can be confusing and do detract somewhat from her generally excellent and well-researched substance.

In the introduction to her book, Neuhaus explains that she's writing it for those introverts, intellectuals, geeks, and nerds out there who are passionate about the subjects they are teaching and have been lucky enough to land a job that allows them to research and write about that subject to their heart's desire. But it's a job that also requires that you teach (and although Neuhaus teaches undergraduates, her principles apply across the board). And, she says, you must teach to a group of students who frequently just don't get how cool legal research/American history/biochemistry is, and who may accuse you of being too much of an expert in your field, leaving you floundering and wondering how to get through the semester.

While Neuhaus doesn't have the full solution for you, she has researched the science of teaching and learning quite extensively, and here she collects her research and her years of experience, as an instructor, an introvert, and a self-proclaimed geek and nerd, into a roadmap for teachers who love their subject and want to convey that love to a group of students who don't always share that love.

Neuhaus breaks the book down into five discrete, easy-to-read chapters. And although there is some necessary overlap and repetition between them, she generally does a good job at separating them. Through her unique organization, she structures teaching and the theories behind good teachers into five component parts: (1) Awareness; (2) Preparation; (3) Reflection; (4) Support; and (5) Practice.

In each of the five chapters, she provides tips and tricks for embracing who you are as a person and genuinely translating that into effective teaching. For example, in the preparation chapter she discusses how she tries to anticipate the random and weird questions that students might have, and how she's gradually developed semi-stock answers to common difficult conversations

(particularly about grades and grading). In the support chapter, she talks about finding campus resources (such as centers for teaching excellence), but she also points out that the support each individual person needs varies by their experience, subject matter, institution, and job performance demands—so the critical part of support is determining the best path for you as a teacher.

Ultimately, this is what struck me most about Neuhaus's book: her unrelenting encouragement to her readers to find their own path, be their own selves, and use their own talents and passions to figure out how to be their own best teachers. While the book is clearly well-researched, it is her insistence that this research means nothing if you can't find a way to genuinely adapt it for yourself that is the key component of the book. And despite sometimes feeling a bit like an outsider for having to look up almost every geek/nerd reference that she made, the book ultimately did give me a sense of empowerment over my own teaching.

I would encourage anyone who wants to be a better teacher, especially those struggling to find their authentic teacher voice (or Professor Pants, as Neuhaus calls the figure we embody when we step into the classroom), to read this book. You'll feel better and have better strategies to take into the classroom after you've read it.

Reviewed by: Taryn Marks, Stanford Law School, in 2019.