

Book Review

***The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University
to Prepare Students for a World in Flux***

by Cathy N. Davidson (2017)

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Davidson's book is a book of two parts: the first part explores structures and philosophies central to the history of the university, while the second part is about contemporary issues.

Dedicating the first two chapters to the history of four-year and two-year institutions, Davidson articulates strengths and challenges associated with each organizational structure. She defines how, facing market conditions in 1857 remarkably similar to the market of 2008, Charles Elliot created a "new university" to reflect changes to technology and industrialization. The second chapter, in turn, presents the community college as an alternative containing innovations useful to four-year institutions. In great detail, she describes the open-access mission and support networks offered to help students access and complete their educational plans, and, tellingly, she describes how two-year schools adapt to changing trends with students and industry. Establishing these historical comparisons frames current challenges as perennial—this is not the first time

American higher education faces the need to innovate and change. In particular, she touts the mission and philosophies of two-year schools as fundamentally different than four-year schools, and she makes a strong argument about how each type of higher education is necessary: they complement, not supplant, each other.

The next pairing of chapters presents routine arguments against technophobia and technophilia. While the first two chapters provide deep historical context, these chapters only provide a cursory analysis of historical themes. Davidson, for example, provides a passing reference to how the slide rule and the novel were once technological innovations bemoaned by institutions. Mentioning these technological innovations, then, frames how MOOCs and social media are the latest forms of technology that higher education struggles with. Of course, she mentions how MOOCs failed to deliver a promise of open online education, and how social media is an integral part of communication. Unlike the previous chapters, though, Davidson fails to present a clear solution to determine which technologies are necessary and which are superfluous. Even the case studies fail to offer a clear path forward. While the chapter argues technology must be integrated, it does not provide any indication or historical comparison as to what should or should not be integrated. The only clear point in this chapter, honestly, is how for-profit institutions fail to deliver an effective education, despite their heavy reliance on technology.

After framing large issues in higher education, Davidson moves on to address current issues. One striking element throughout this section is a paucity of historical or institutional context. In an especially glaring oversight, Davidson assumes all students are affected equally by financial aid issues, despite earlier distinction between two- and four-

year institutions. While she describes how medical students and at-risk community college students are affected by college debt, she does not account for a disparate impact on these two groups. Obfuscating the effect on different student populations, and considering the history presented earlier in the book, minimizes the impact of this argument that a new higher education is needed. While Davidson's use of case study is impressive, blending institutions together without historical context is a noticeable flaw. Additionally, Davidson raises more problems than solutions. The proposed solutions are a few, scant pages in this chapter (Australia's Higher Education Loan Program gets a mere paragraph, for example), and, while provocative, more analysis about how other countries manage their student loan debt would be beneficial. After all, given the increasing amount of student loan debt in this country, I imagine other readers would want this information, too.

If the chapter about financial aid stumbles, however, the chapters about pedagogy and assessment do not. Here the examples convincingly present problems and solutions. Davidson presents two challenges in the classroom: a dependence on lectures and a dependence on standardized assessment. After a discussion about how the industrial revolution influenced education by integrating a hierarchal model based on seat time and ranking students like types of meats (Grade A), she presents several professors inspiring their students to make a palpable impact on their communities. The scope of these classrooms expands beyond memorizing and recalling information and focuses on analyzing and synthesizing information from many disciplines with many different people: college classrooms need to focus on interdisciplinary problem solving and collaboration. Further, she describes how some states, such as Arizona and Virginia, are remaking their

general education programs to focus on an interdisciplinary ethos. For students to be successful in an ever-evolving world, they must be asked open-ended questions eliciting higher levels of critical thinking.

With this shift in pedagogy, classrooms must also contain a shift in assessment and evaluation—the emphasis must be on feedback and growth. After making the requisite reference to Carol Dweck’s growth mindset, Davidson presents a detailed study of Alexander Coward, a former math professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Integrating history and research about testing, assessment, and formative feedback with this case study, Davidson explains the damages of a grade-based culture: students worry about points, not learning content. Importantly, her examples convincingly present feedback-based cultures as an alternative. In this new culture, students learn to solve open-ended problems and ask critical questions; they become independent, responsible learners. In perhaps her strongest chapter in the book, she uses Coward’s classroom and pedagogy to evince how these changes can happen. Readers could use this chapter to transform their own classrooms. She also uses Coward to express another challenge for the university: tradition. After being advised to conform to other, traditional professors in the department, and after his students outperformed others on departmental exams, Coward was relieved of his teaching duties. Thus, Coward’s case study is a cautionary example of how some innovations are not easily embraced because of institutional traditions, which, while never stated, is a subliminal theme throughout the book.

Davidson’s conclusion is about the future of higher education and focuses on several modern change agents. Much like her previous examples, these are the leaders developing

new programs focusing on civic engagement and interdisciplinary study. This conclusion presents nothing new that has not been discussed elsewhere in the book. The routine conclusion to her argument is the perfunctory call for merging theory with practice to establish a new ideology for our new education.

Oddly, the book concludes with two lists of strategies for students and instructors, breaking from the traditional format of other chapters. In my opinion, a chapter about how administration or state officials can also encourage these changes would have been a satisfying conclusion. While the advice is good, such as telling students to manage risks and diversity their education, each of the paragraphs could easily be a proposal for a new book chapter. Not only are the suggestions obvious (find a great professor or use think-pair-share exercises), but these passages are devoid of research or critical rationale. For a book that stresses student-centered learning, these lists are strikingly didactic.

Overall, Davidson's book presents the information in an engaging style, and, while the foundation of her argument is solid, gaps in her structure and presentation exist. Davidson's book provides a detailed history of higher education, and it is an easy read with an accessible writing style, but it will not convince anyone that does not already support these innovations. The new education promised in the title never fully appears in the book.