

BOOK REVIEW
Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto

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Book review

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It is no coincidence that Kevin M. Gannon's *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* – a brief, accessible articulation of his teaching philosophy, defined by critical pedagogy and social justice – was released in 2020. The book's publication coincided with a moment in which years of discussion around the effectiveness and equity of higher education came to a head, in a few ways: (1) The Black Lives Matter protests following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others clarified the need to reassess our educational institutions' complicity in a history of white supremacy in America. (2) COVID-19 lockdowns threw schools into crisis, requiring students, teachers, and administrators to figure out remote learning mid-semester, which clarified how inflexible and ill-equipped for change many of our academic institutions are. (3) A presidential election illuminated how divided we are as a nation, not simply in how we identify politically but in how we define knowledge and whether we value facts. In this context, Gannon's book provides a helpful introduction for teachers in higher education to begin a process of self-examination and to do their part in making teaching and learning more meaningful and our world a better, freer, safer place for everyone who lives in it.

As indicated in the title, Gannon's philosophy is one characterized by "hope," though he is careful to note that his definition of the term involves much more effort than idle wishing for better schools or a more just society. He writes:

The very acts of trying to teach well, of adopting a critically reflective practice to improve our teaching and our students' learning, are radical, in that word's literal sense: they are endeavors aimed at fundamental, root-level transformation. And they are acts of hope because they imagine that process of transformation as one in which a better future takes shape out of our students' critical refusal to abide the limitations of the present (p. 5).

The emphasis the book places on practical efforts that individual educators can make to produce change even in their relatively small spheres of influence makes sense given Gannon's role as the Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Grand View University. His efforts in this position suggest that he is not simply interested in researching innovative pedagogy. Rather, Gannon is actively implementing changes in how he and his colleagues approach day-to-day practices like developing curricula, leading class discussions, assessing student learning, addressing issues of accessibility, and so on. It may also be of

interest to some readers that in addition to his teaching and administrative work, Gannon has recently become somewhat of a public intellectual on the subject of education in America, for example, appearing in Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th* (2016) and amassing a following on social media as @TheTattooedProf.

To be clear, Gannon is not just a pundit; the approach he employs in his book is grounded in educational theory and research. The early chapters of the book establish a framework for the exercises that follow, drawing upon concepts from voices within the tradition of critical pedagogy – most notably bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Henry Giroux. For those who are more familiar with the tradition, Gannon's description of critical pedagogy may feel a little light. However, given his commitment to making these ideas accessible to working educators and to helping them implement some immediate changes to pressing problems, this relative lack of depth is understandable. If anything, the book's breezy 161 pages might function as a gateway for some readers – especially those who lack extensive experience in educational philosophy but are interested in improving their teaching in ways that better serve their students and society in general. Reading Gannon's book ideally will encourage them to go on to read some of these more foundational (and arguably more "radical") texts and further their familiarity with the key concepts and practices of critical pedagogy.

Each one of the book's ten chapters explores related but distinct issues within higher education – including increasing access, celebrating diversity, facilitating active learning, allowing for failure, and so on. In each chapter, Gannon weaves personal anecdotes from both his time as a professor and as a student with relevant research on education and contemporary social issues. Some of the stronger chapters strike an especially effective synthesis of these different elements. For example, in one chapter, the author references the "Unite the Right" rally on the University of Virginia's campus in 2017 to illustrate how institutions of higher education are inevitable sites of ideological conflict. Then, he cites the hate expressed and the people harmed during these events as some of the potential consequences of our failure to provide students with spaces to safely and effectively navigate such pressing issues as racial justice and to empower them to meaningfully contribute to positive social change.

Each of the chapters ends with a sidebar titled "Into Practice" in which the author prompts readers to engage in some sort of thought exercise or writing activity

intended to find practical application for the concepts introduced in that chapter. These prompts function to help readers connect theory with practice, including specific processes like writing syllabi, grading student work, establishing classroom policies, and facilitating class discussions. These end-of-chapter sections – while sometimes a bit brief so that they feel like a bit of an afterthought – are further demonstration of the book’s intention of helping actual educators make measurable, meaningful, and sustainable changes in their practice.

Media literacy scholars and educators will likely relate to the frustrations voiced and the critiques communicated by Gannon given that the field of media literacy education has, at least in part, functioned as response to some of these same limitations of traditional education. The book’s emphasis on fostering dialogue, encouraging student-directed learning, practicing reflective pedagogy, and grounding learning in life outside of the classroom will resonate with many readers of the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*. And for those media scholars and educators, myself among them, who identify with the tradition of *critical media literacy*, the book’s employment of “radical hope” not simply to envision more effective educational institutions and practices, but also bring about positive social change, will reinforce with their vision of education as transformative and emancipatory.

There are specific sequences from the book that explicitly correspond with some of the interests of media educators. For example, in one chapter Gannon discusses how adopting a more self-reflexive teaching philosophy encouraged him to revise his rules around and responses to students’ use of laptops and mobile devices in the classroom. It’s likely that some practitioners within media literacy education may feel that the book misses an opportunity to discuss in greater depth how contemporary technologies and current trends in media and popular culture have impacted higher education, as well as to explore what educators can do to productively engage with these changes. Overall, Gannon’s interest in not simply complaining about the problems within higher education but also generating a productive, hopeful way forward will be motivating for so many media literacy educators I know who are invested in improving both their own pedagogy and American education more broadly. The strategies he discusses include facilitating students’ practice of

agency, experimenting with innovative teaching methodologies, bridging the gap between course content and active citizenship, and many more.

The book is not without its limitations. The “Into Practice” sections might be expanded, more fully embracing this ethic of praxis and providing even more scaffolding for educators who are eager to implement some of these ideas in their practice but may be unsure how best to move forward. Though, to be fair, this is a delicate balance – empowering educators to make positive changes to their pedagogy without being overly prescriptive and thereby inhibiting them from making their own decisions. Also, the potential practical applications that Gannon suggests in the book are mostly limited to individualized efforts – changing up the teaching methodologies and course curriculum, for example – rather than advocating for broader institutional changes.

Another limitation is how Gannon chooses to frame his status, specifically, as a white, male, tenured faculty member¹. While the author certainly acknowledges his positionality and even recognizes how he is afforded certain privileges as a result of his status, some might argue that the book would benefit from an even more self-reflexive approach. For example, Gannon’s position as a full professor and seasoned administrator at an established educational institution enables him to experiment with innovative pedagogical approaches without feeling the same fear of consequences as some of his less-privileged, or at least less-established, colleagues. The author’s ability to take these sorts of risks makes his advocacy for a revolution in higher education slightly safer (and a little less “radical”) than if this argument came from someone at the margins (as opposed to the center) of the discourse. As another white guy, also tenured at an established educational institution, I couldn’t help but think as I read and reviewed the book that its argument might have been more substantive, and of greater consequence if – more than simply *respond* to the marginalization of women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ peoples within education (and culture more generally) – it was *representative* of the perspectives and experiences of those very communities.

This brings me to some final thoughts on *Radical Hope: A Teacher’s Manifesto* – which could be understood as speaking less to a limitation of the book

¹ While APA style requires names of racial and ethnic groups to be capitalized as proper nouns, I’ve elected not to capitalize the term “white” in this review. The reasoning for my decision

echoes that of the Associated Press, which can be read out here <https://bit.ly/2W22cxw>.

itself than to the state of education in America. The quote included above emphasizes the power of hope to be able to realize a higher education defined by inclusion, equity, and social justice. This is an admirable goal, especially given the exclusion, inequality, injustice, and so many other challenges that we are facing today, both as educators and citizens. Though, Gannon is careful to point out that in order for us to achieve this objective for a truly democratic higher education, we need to reassess much more than our political praxis. His claim that “the very acts of trying to teach well... are *radical*...” (p. 5) implies that the norm within our educational institutions is *not* to try to teach well and, even worse, that this norm is so established that simply to *try* (not even to *succeed*) to teach well is a drastic departure from the status quo. Maybe this is Gannon mischaracterizing the state of education in the US for the sake of his argument. Or maybe the author is using the rhetoric of “radical hope” to get readers’ attention but, in actuality, is committed to more sensible, incremental changes. Or perhaps, both the book’s assessment of American education and its revolutionary rhetoric is justified, and we really have reached such a low point in higher education that simply attempting to improve our teaching is “radical.” I suppose that as educators who read the book and attempt to put its argument into practice, we will discover whether Gannon’s argument is simply a bit overstated or if, in fact, education in the US is in such a state of crisis that simply “trying to teach well” might be considered revolutionary praxis.