BOOK REVIEW:
Creating Courses for Adults: Design for Learning **by Ralf St. Clair**

Review by Jessica Kubiak

St. Clair, Ralf. *Creating Courses for Adults: Design for Learning,* Jossey-Bass, 2015.

In *Creating Courses for Adults: Design for Learning*, Ralf St. Clair asserts that effective course design requires deliberate decision-making about course elements along with a commitment to reflection, and his explicit purpose is to provide a framework for design that is general enough to be useful in both formal and non-formal adult education settings across content areas. While delivering such a framework, St. Clair intentionally avoids both theory-laden discourse on one hand and "how to" lists on the other (xiv); instead, he works to ensure that his proposed framework finds a middle ground. Along the way, he also introduces readers to the major tenets of adult education, which makes *Creating Courses for Adults* an effective primer for any emerging adult educator: from the seasoned content area expert who has been asked to design a course, to the new graduate student who seeks a foundation before carrying out instruction for the first time.

After situating course design as part of a broader tradition of design practices in his preface, St. Clair delineates *Courses* into two parts. In Part One, "Core Factors in Teaching," St. Clair thoughtfully considers three overarching variables in the teaching-learning process: *learner realities*, he argues, along with *educator positionality* and *contextual circumstances*, should be at the core of every decision made when designing instruction for adults. Part Two, "The Key Decisions," makes up the bulk of *Courses* with seven chapters, six of which focus on St. Clair's six elements of design, and one of which briefly summarizes those elements.

St. Clair's message in Part One is especially timely, for in many of our institutions, student populations are increasingly comprised of learners who fit the adult learner profile: learners are not only older and therefore "nontraditional," but are operating with what St. Clair refers to as a "working-class learning style" (44-5). This is the adult learner St. Clair describes in Chapter Two as he moves from relaying a brief history of adult education as a discipline concerned with a distinct population, to exploring how learner identity impacts what is learned.

St. Clair systematically outlines various elements of a learner's identity that may impact teaching and learning: age, gender, culture, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ability. He then looks to critical race theory, feminist pedagogy, and the work of Paulo Freire to provide guidance for conceptualizing and successfully navigating these constructs. His analysis of diversity is punctuated with a compelling section in which he proposes a series of guiding ideas consistent with the principles of multicultural education that St. Clair calls "responsive teaching" (48). This modified approach to universal design relies on specific teaching methods and methodologies to ensure learner progress: complex and authentic assignments, learner choice, scaffolding, collaborative work, application of personal experience to course concepts, intentional small groupings, and diverse assessment strategies. One such responsive teaching concept introduced at length in Chapter Two and referenced regularly throughout the text is "learning careers." An instructional strategy that helps learners both make sense of and communicate (to peers and educators) their "complex stories of getting more or less engaged in learning over time, influenced by friends, family, opportunities, and barriers" (34), learning careers work invites learners to compose via multiple modes of communication and summarily encapsulates the responsive teaching approach.

Chapter Two also introduces what ought to be compulsory information for educators about how adults learn, examined from the perspectives of both behaviorist theories--from which most formal assessment structures derive, as St. Clair notes--and sociocultural theories, which underpin concepts such as communities of practice, apprenticeships, and transformative education (27-8). St. Clair presents both sets of theories as valid and useful, though he makes it clear that sociocultural theories of learning heavily influence his own teaching and both the structure and content of *Courses* (27). St. Clair's handling of sociocultural learning is relatively thorough and includes a list of principles for "responsive teaching" (29-30) echoed from the book's opening, along with a list of core beliefs derived from the theories such as, "Learning is a social process conducted . . . with other humans," and, "Individuals will repeat actions that are associated with a reward, including the approval of peers" (29).

In this respect, *Courses* itself illustrates St. Clair's claim in Chapters One and Three that an educator's and an organization's respective underlying values and beliefs about education necessarily impact instructional design. Similar to St. Clair's study of learner identity, his discussion of educator identity is particularly strong and includes consideration of educator experiences, training, ways of thinking about how learning happens, assumptions, and privilege. Of particular note are sections on instructional philosophy and perspective, where St. Clair introduces two paradigms for situating oneself as an educator. He highlights five "philosophical viewpoints that underpin adult education" (12) before exploring specific "teaching perspectives" (13) that detail how an instructor views the role and purpose of education. Both of these, including associated categories such as "humanist educator" (12) and "nurturing perspective" (14), become touchstones throughout the text as St. Clair refers to specific methods that align more naturally with one perspective or another. Likewise, he notes the values of an organization

and its stakeholders will also play a role in the teaching-learning process. Such components of educational context may dictate everything from the formality, modality, and aims of instruction to the material and financial resources allocated to an educator and the instructional setting.

Each chapter in Part Two first introduces an element of course design before considering that element in light of the text's three "core factors" addressed at length in Part One: educator, learner, and context. Not surprisingly, some material within these chapters is therefore redundant. Foregoing Part Two, though, would prevent the reader from being introduced to such critical concepts as experiential learning (173-4), the usefulness of rubrics (155-6), how to deal with negative student evaluations (138-9), and dozens of other instructional considerations. A practicing educator with some creativity and a sense of the dynamics at play both in and around instructional time might struggle to find much revolutionary content beyond Part One, but important topics such as learning transfer can be found and are dealt with extensively. Also, chapter features such as element-specific scenarios effectively activate the reader's need to explore course design from a particular chapter's vantage point. Chapter Ten, however, is even more inconsistent with St. Clair's general insightfulness, for in an effort to summarize and encapsulate his framework, the chapter falls back on poorly informed approaches to instructional design. Oversimplified responses to questions such as, "What's important to you in a teacher?" (188) seem to undermine the first few chapters' nuanced consideration of educator positionality and awareness of diverse learner background and experiences. And so, while the graphics and layout of this final chapter look appealing as overviews of the full text, they do not function as such.

St. Clair's appendix on further resources points readers to broad databases and websites, but he also embeds within Parts One and Two multiple references to sources for more

information that are equally worth exploring. Readers of *Courses* interested in deeper consideration of the aims, objectives, and methods St. Clair discusses in Chapters Four and Six might also find L. Dee Fink's *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, though perhaps more overtly aligned with behaviorist principles than *Courses*, a beneficial next step. Likewise, readers sufficiently steeped in rationale from Chapters Seven and Eight who desire an array of concrete options for evaluating teaching and learning might consult Angelo and Cross's *Classroom Assessment Techniques*. While neither of these pertain specifically to writing instruction, they are, like St. Clair's text, broadly applicable across disciplines.

St. Clair's intentional omission of specific instructional strategies in favor of a conceptual foundation from which readers can develop their own applications is a refreshing change from those slightly insulting and patronizing books that list decontextualized techniques with the promise of successful teaching. However, where St. Clair shines are the moments when he follows his well-reasoned and researched design approaches with illustrations of application from his own teaching. Especially for the novice educator targeted by the text, specific examples from St. Clair's own wealth of experience would not be heavy-handed proclamations that his is the only way to do something, but glimpses into the lived practice of the veteran educator. St. Clair is certainly that, and emerging adult educators of all stripes will do well to consult the fundamentals of his framework for course design.

Works Cited

Angelo, Thomas A., and K. Patricia Cross. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*. 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, 1993.

Fink, L. Dee. *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, 2013.

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