

# Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University

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Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 6

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January 2011

## Review of Christopher Uhl's Teaching as if Life Matters

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### Recommended Citation

McCoy, Janet Rice (2011) "Review of Christopher Uhl's Teaching as if Life Matters," *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*. Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: 10.58809/EZCW8779

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol3/iss1/6>

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Christopher Uhl with Dana L. Stuchul. *Teaching as if Life Matters: The Promise of a New Education Culture*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2011. xvii, 202 p. ISBN 9781421400396. \$25.**

Christopher Uhl's *Teaching as if Life Matters: The Promise of a New Education Culture* is unlike anything I have ever reviewed. Instead of reading with yellow highlighter in hand ready to mark key sentences and concepts, I wrote in my personal journal rather than the margins. Reading this book was a contemplative, rather than an academic, experience reminding me of why I had been drawn to the vocation of teaching in the first place.

Uhl, professor of biology at The Pennsylvania State University, argues the current education system is broken, failing not just our students, but also humanity and our environment. Uhl speaks from personal experience prompted by viewing photographs of himself, seeing "the sparkle—the innocence" in his two-year-old eyes "dissolve with time, replaced by a mixture of submission and melancholy" in grade school photos (p. xi). He sees this pattern repeating on his campus where students' faces have "signs of resignation, consternation, boredom, restlessness, exhaustion, skepticism, fear, and more" (p. 3).

In the first two chapters, Uhl describes and analyzes his perception of the problems associated with traditional education. He argues the system is built upon a foundation of four myths regarding where and how the best learning occurs: (1) within schools and the four walls of a classroom; (2) by directly transferring knowledge from teacher to student; (3) by using carrots for rewards and sticks for punishments; and (4) by viewing students as objects to be acted upon with the results quantified. His background in ecology, with a systems approach to Earth and Cosmos, provides the trigger for challenging these core beliefs regarding education. In the four remaining chapters, Uhl explores how teachers can move beyond being "brains on a stick" (p. 16). This is done by learning to love the questions, then reconnecting their intellectual self with their body, emotions, and intuition so the primary focus shifts to nurturing relationships with self, others, and Earth. Uhl believes teachers who reconnect with themselves are able to positively connect with their students and the natural world which ultimately enhances the overall learning process.

Uhl's book is not for everyone. Readers will need to go elsewhere if they are looking for a straightforward methods driven how-to book to improve teaching. In fact, those readers will probably view this text as too

touchy-feely. These readers would also be likely to reject the four myths of traditional education Uhl identifies in his first chapter. This book is a good match, however, for those who are drawn to spiritual masters such as Thomas Merton and master teachers such as Parker Palmer, since readers are encouraged to look within themselves throughout the narrative.

The focus on Uhl's personal experience as a biologist and environmentalist is both an asset and a liability as a writer. It is an advantage because it gives him permission to challenge a traditional model of education and to identify four foundational myths. It is a limitation because readers from other academic disciplines may find it difficult to transfer his suggested activities, such as bonding with the trees, to their courses. I kept asking myself while reading, "How do I apply his insights to my discipline?" That being said, the reflective exercises in each chapter were useful and pointed me in the direction of new teaching strategies.

This is the first book I have reviewed that directly impacted my behavior during the process of reading. When faced with a teaching challenge, I found myself asking, "How can this situation become an opportunity to build community in the classroom, and with our service-learning partners in the community, as we work together to make the world a better place?" Uhl's text is inspirational. In his own words, it is "an invitation to ground education in love," since "our times are beckoning teachers who have the self-awareness, courage, and wisdom to understand themselves as helpers, healers, facilitators, guides—as people who love!" (p. 14-15). This book is best read when one has time to linger contemplatively with his insights. In addition, *Teaching as if Life Matters* would be an excellent choice for a faculty learning community focused on improving their teaching by looking within themselves.

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