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## Review of Rebecca D. Cox's The College Fear Factor: How Students and Professors Misunderstand One Another

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## Book Reviews

**Rebecca D. Cox.** *The College Fear Factor: How Students and Professors Misunderstand One Another.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 198 p. ISBN 9780674060166. \$16.95.

Picture this: small groups of students work together on a peer review exercise in a composition class, their desks arranged in clusters around the room, while the teacher circulates among the groups rather than standing in front of the blackboard lecturing. This scene of collaborative, student-centered, experiential learning might be every critical pedagogue's dream; however, according to Rebecca Cox, it is the typical community college student's nightmare. Cox studies this major disconnect between teachers' and students' definitions of good teaching at the micro-level of classroom interactions. While it starts in the individual classroom, her analysis extends to broader systemic issues in education including the move toward standardized testing in K-12, growing interest in writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives, and the burgeoning field of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL).

Cox's valuable insights into students' perceptions of teaching styles are grounded in her extensive first-hand research. Over the course of five years, she conducted over one hundred interviews, completed several semester-long classroom observations, and questioned focus groups including students, teachers, and administrators at over thirty colleges throughout the United States. Her findings reveal that community college students, especially first-generation, enter the classroom expecting a traditional professorial teaching style focused on the authoritarian transmission of knowledge through a lecture format, akin to Paolo Friere's concept of the banking model of education. When teachers use group work or discussion, students see these alternative teaching methods as "irrelevant 'b.s.,' a waste of time, or simply a lack of instruction" (p. 94). Consequently, students resist these methods in passive ways (such as staying silent, not turning in assignments, or dropping out) as well as through overt verbal challenges and power struggles. In addition, Cox points out that teachers using alternative methods often face even more resistance from colleagues and administrators.

Despite all this resistance, Cox urges these teachers not to give up: "understanding students' expectations and preconceptions is not the same as adopting pedagogical strategies that confirm students' existing beliefs" (p. 164). Students may expect a professorial style, and teachers should respond to their expectations, but that does not mean that teachers should perpetuate those expectations. Instead, Cox advocates a relational model that will loosen the "stranglehold" of the prevailing professorial model

(p. 113). She offers two success stories of teachers who balance authority with approachability, but she follows these examples with a stunning conclusion: in general, these two teachers are "no different" from their colleagues and "simply applying [their] strategies would not produce the same results" (p. 115). In fact, Cox determines, "it was not the classroom dynamics per se that mattered, as much as students' perceptions of the classroom dynamics" (p. 117). So, the ability to replicate their success relies less on imitating their specific methods and more on understanding the disconnect between teachers and students in the first place.

Cox's approach is most compelling when she gives her readers access to the hidden fears and anxieties of first-generation students. In their candid responses to her interview questions, these students explain how panic attacks and lack of self-confidence lead them to miss class, skip assignments, or drop out. One student confesses that she just does not participate in class at all because she fears being exposed as "too stupid" for college (p. 34). What teachers may interpret as laziness or indifference often masks debilitating fears. Unless teachers validate those fears, Cox argues, they will be unsuccessful in facilitating learning.

Although Cox connects these fears to the expectations of first-generation students, she gives surprisingly little attention to how those expectations originate. Readers may wish that she had offered an explanation of where these students acquired their perceptions of how a professor should act: from high school? peers? the media? And, despite her consideration of a wide range of systemic changes in higher education, she omits any discussion of trends in distance learning or hiring adjuncts. Her detailed description of her national field study in the appendix mentions that some of the interviewed students were taking online courses, but she does not discuss whether her findings about students' resistance to nontraditional teaching methods extend to distance learning. Likewise, she analyzes the ways in which teaching evaluations are heavily weighted toward the professorial "teaching as telling" model, but she misses an opportunity to delve into the importance of these evaluations for non-tenure-track faculty whose part-time status endangers the academic freedom conducive to experimentation with the alternative teaching strategies that she supports. Still, these omissions are not necessarily weaknesses; in fact, they speak to the richness of Cox's timely project and the ways in which it could prompt further research.

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