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## **Book Review: Teaching with Compassion: An Educator's Oath to Teach from the Heart, by Peter Kaufman and Janine Schipper**

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*Teaching with Compassion: An Educator's Oath to Teach from the Heart*, by Peter Kaufman and Janine Schipper. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. July 2018. ISBN: 978-1-4758-3655-4. 170 pages. Paperback: \$28.00.

This is not a conventional book review. I was good friends with one of the authors of the book, Peter Kaufman, until he passed away last November, a few months after the book's release. I try to provide an objective assessment of the book itself, but more than that, I offer some insight into Peter's life and commitment to the ideals embodied in those pages.

I have known hundreds if not thousands of educators in my lifetime, but it is no exaggeration to say that I have never known anyone more committed to the craft of teaching than Peter Kaufman. It absorbed him. As a professor of sociology at the State University of New York at New Paltz, he strived constantly to improve his own classes, but much of the rest of his professional and personal life was dedicated to the educational enterprise. He attended conferences on teaching, ran workshops on pedagogy, and served on the editorial board of *Teaching Sociology*. Increasingly, education became the center of his scholarship.

He lived this commitment to teaching literally until his death, using his disease and the mortal threat it posed as stimulation for some of his most profound sociological insights. He was prolific in his final months. Given the time he had left and the slow pace of academic publishing, he shunned traditional forums and instead dedicated himself to blogging and Twitter. He found the instantaneous nature of these outlets satisfying and essential given his condition. They also reflected his daring and willingness to make himself vulnerable. He acknowledged that some of the ideas he shared were undeveloped, but this was consistent with his philosophy of learning as a process. Knowledge is not simply established, disseminated, memorized, and repeated. Rather, ideas, half-baked or fully formed, are to be shared, reflected upon, and discussed, and through that exchange true learning takes place.

Peter's willingness to do this while enduring a terminal illness embodied the compassion he espoused. As a portent of his coming struggles, he wrote in *Teaching with Compassion*, "Indeed, adversity, rather than being an obstacle to finding a pathway to compassion, can be a valuable portal" (pp. 27-28). When faced with extreme adversity in the form of a fatal illness, Peter was not going to pass up this learning opportunity or ignore his ability to share with people perspectives that most have not engaged. His "microburst essays" posted on Twitter include a number of sociologically informed reflections on death and dying (and on life and living).

Even before his illness, he was a regular blogger for Norton's Everyday Sociology forum. One of his last blog posts, "A Sociology of My Death," written just two months before his passing, was shared thousands of times and was read around the world. Just weeks before he died, Peter gave a public interview in a packed auditorium on the SUNY New Paltz campus in which he reflected candidly on all that he was experiencing. He imparted wisdom derived from his experience, but he did not deny the anger and resentment that perhaps inevitably come with the randomness of disease and the prospect of an early death, especially for one who was a lifelong athlete and deeply committed to personal health. Peter was 51 when a genetically derived form of lung cancer took his life, having never once taken a puff of a cigarette or a drag from a joint.

Peter's blogs and tweets comprise a valuable archive of his thinking and are a testament to his commitment as an educator. Yet, he also published many articles on the subject of teaching, and *Teaching with Compassion* is the culmination of decades of reflection and research on how education is best carried out. Central to his conclusions is the idea that learning cannot take place, understanding cannot develop, and knowledge cannot be created without compassion.

Peter and his co-author, Janine Schipper, cite three foundations for the ideas put forth in the book: sociology, critical pedagogy, and Buddhism. They use a sociological perspective to analyze both the structural constraints imposed upon educators and the social conditions under which students live. They acknowledge that, presently, many state and federal policies tend to favor the rote memorization of material dictated in standardized tests and narrow assessment protocols. This presents significant institutional barriers to fully implementing the approach they advocate.

Sociology is also integral to their philosophy in that it allows educators to recognize the importance of the conditions under which students are living and learning. It provides a lens through which to view the world from the perspective of others, and thus better understand how they experience the classroom. This also feeds into the role of critical pedagogy, a teaching approach advocated by theorists such as Paulo Freire. In accordance with this approach, students are not to be seen as empty vessels into which teachers deposit knowledge—the “banking model” common under the standardized-test regimes that now characterize much public education. Critical pedagogy requires that educators recognize that students themselves have unique experiences and ideas to share, and that they must be active agents in knowledge creation and in their own education.

Buddhism is the third pillar upon which *Teaching with Compassion* rests. Buddhism came to play an increasingly large role in Peter’s evolution as a pedagogue. The authors cite a UNESCO study of education around the world which, in its quest to identify what universally characterizes effective teachers, found one common denominator: love. Threats, fear, competition, intimidation, and humiliation—the way many students experience contemporary education—are antithetical to the educational enterprise. Compassion, love, mutual support, and humility—these inspire an entirely different attitude and an openness to learning. According to the authors, they are the core requirements of effective education.

Born of these three elements, this pedagogical philosophy is shared throughout *Teaching with Compassion*, but the book is much more than an explication of learning theory. It is also full of practical lessons and exercises that allow the reader to see how theory is put into practice. Each chapter addresses central tenets of what the authors synthesize into the “Teaching with Compassion Oath.” Much like the Hippocratic Oath taken by medical doctors, Peter and his co-author recommend that educators have their own oath, one in which “the emotional, social, and intellectual well-being of students is [our] main priority and [our] actions as educator[s] shall reflect that goal.” Following an introductory chapter on the nature of compassion and what it means to teach with compassion, the eight chapters of the book elaborate on the eight elements of the oath.

Many of the principles included in the oath are not unfamiliar: Follow the Golden Rule, exercise humility, listen to others. These are practices with which educators are familiar and that they may even claim to embrace. But for most, critical self-reflection would reveal that they do not practice these ways as often as they could. The authors are honest about this and about their own personal struggles to consistently adhere to these principles.

At times, all educators succumb to the negative emotions—frustration, anger, defensiveness—that arise in the face of challenging situations in the classroom. The authors characterize this as suffering: “When we are angry a part of us suffers, and we look for relief from this suffering. Some find relief by blaming others for their suffering. Some seek relief by releasing their anger onto another” (p. 32). Needless to say, blaming students for their failure to learn is not optimal for advancing learning. When adopted as a general perspective, this can drive teachers to

embrace misguided conceptions of their role and the purpose of educational institutions as a whole. It can reinforce the idea that the education system is designed solely to impart skills for careers and to sort students into their respective roles based on innate capabilities. Within that framework, the job of educators is to train and test in order to identify those less capable and then channel them into jobs suited to their abilities. In this context, students who fail or who disrupt meticulously planned class lessons are the problem. Thus, teachers are doing a difficult job effectively when they weed out the failures and trouble makers.

This is a tempting, somewhat satisfying, and all too common perspective among educators at all levels. Peter was troubled by colleagues who complained about the problems with “students today,” often characterizing an entire generation based on a few frustrating anecdotes and using such experiences to justify becoming more demanding and rigid in the classroom. He wrote about this in an article he published on the toxic effects of denigrating students. Yet, the authors of *Teaching with Compassion* are not naïve about the constraints that educators face. Overcrowded classrooms, a lack of resources, high-stakes testing mandates, and underprepared students who endure problems in their home lives are all real challenges that can lead to frustration and steer educators toward conventional banking techniques or, worse, drive them away from the field of education altogether. Peter was close with many K-12 teachers, including his partner, Leigh, who have seen their roles transformed from educators into implementers of training centered on state-mandated tests. Many of the best teachers have been lost to this misguided trend.

The structural constraints imposed through educational institutions must be addressed at the policy level. Many teachers and even entire schools have resisted the confining mandates imposed by policymakers and elected officials. But even operating under these constraints does not require total surrender to the bank-and-test regimen. A compassionate approach still affords K-12 teachers an opportunity to nurture students even while carrying out mandated lesson plans. Also, most faculty at the college level still have a fair amount of latitude to utilize methods that can inspire students. Above all, *Teaching with Compassion* provides educators an opportunity to reflect on these issues, to consider their goals, and to think about what approach would best foster the educational outcomes they really value. One chapter, “Learn from Adversity,” describes a number of reflective exercises that re-conceptualize the challenges educators face and redirects frustration into compassion.

While some of the book includes Buddhist-inspired reflective practices for educators, other parts focus on classroom techniques. Given the principles of critical pedagogy, most of the techniques described in the book involve collaborative learning. For example, the second chapter, “Practice Beginner’s Mind,” is based upon the notion espoused by Freire that teachers can learn from their students. This perspective is fused with Buddhist philosophy. The authors quote the Zen Buddhist monk Shunryu Suzuki, who wrote, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s mind there are few.” Educators teach best when they do not seek to dominate the minds of their students but instead open their own minds to the possibility of learning as a shared enterprise.

To demonstrate this point and to empower students in their own knowledge, the authors describe an exercise whereby students are asked to first list things they want to learn, then to list things they could teach others. These need not be related to the class material and can include anything from how to play guitar to learning a language or how to swim. These lists are shared, and students and, importantly, the instructor write their names under the topics they would like to learn. The exercise is designed to demonstrate that everyone is capable of being both a learner and a teacher, including the instructor for the class. It empowers students in their own knowledge

while helping to reignite the intellectual curiosity that is often extinguished over the course of years in an education system in which students are simply told what they must learn. It also provides a glimpse into the lives of students outside the classroom, a familiarity that the authors consider vital to the development of a learning community, one in which everyone embraces the “beginner’s mind” and opens themselves to learning.

The book includes several more reflection and classroom exercises that impart other elements of the Oath of Compassion. Each chapter ends with questions for further contemplation. None is designed to provide definitive answers but to provoke more questions and reflection in a spirit of compassion. In the Internet age of multitasking and instantaneous data, this book would be a success if readers simply used the opportunity to contemplate their role as educators, regardless of how it might change their teaching strategies. In all likelihood, though, it will shape its readers, the way they think, and the way they approach the classroom.

I began the book somewhat skeptically. I am wary of any hint of religious authority. (Peter always insisted that, for him at least, Buddhism was a philosophy, not a religion.) This skepticism was coupled by the fact that I teach in a public college that has witnessed years of funding cuts and an ever-growing assessment mandate that would seem to render new enlightened pedagogical approaches all but impossible. It is an ongoing struggle to simply maintain reasonable class sizes and to defend academic freedom. Taking several days worth of class time for students to simply get to know one another can appear unrealistic in this context.

I personally may not be willing to go as far as the authors suggest. Community-building exercises inevitably require that something be taken away, and I have not yet completely abandoned traditional notions of covering all the “core” content in a class. But the ideas in *Teaching with Compassion* challenge me. How much of that core material will students remember a few years or even a few months on? How is their learning experience affected if I do not even learn all of their names by the end of the semester? Would a focus on a more limited quantity of material take on deeper meaning and develop their knowledge more if it is considered among a community of learners who know and care for one another? If so, what is the balance that must be struck between taking the time to foster these sentiments and traditional expectations of what students are “supposed” to derive from a class?

These are questions I have not yet answered for myself, and while not entirely new to me, *Teaching with Compassion* has provided new angles for me to think deeply about these issues. At the same time, it offers practical guidance for how to enact compassionate teaching in the classroom and exercises with which one can experiment. Educators would be wise to try some of the exercises included in the book to see for themselves what effect it can have on their classrooms. Certainly all teachers could benefit from reflecting on the basic values the authors espouse and thinking about how they can better demonstrate compassion for their students and others.

In conclusion, I will describe one of my favorite exercises included in the book. Noting that much emphasis is placed on how people differ and the divisions and boundaries this can create, the authors developed “The Similarities Project,” an exercise that instead asks students to consider what they have in common. In an iterative process, students in groups of two are asked to come up with a list of 10 things that they have in common. This can include anything from being students to liking pizza or using social media. Then each pair joins with another, and there they collectively identify what all four found in common and then go on to identify 10 more things. This group then joins with the next and carries out the same process until the entire class is brought together to reflect on the many things that unite them. In an age of extreme division, taking the time to recognize our common humanity is invaluable, and the effect can be transformative.

The authors provide an example of the long list of commonalities that can be generated through this exercise. The last item on the list hit me hard: “We will all eventually die.” Peter Kaufman’s death came too early, but not so soon that he did not have time to share some valuable wisdom. It was a privilege to be his colleague and his friend. The thousands of students who had him as a teacher or who read his work are similarly fortunate. With the publication of *Teaching with Compassion* there is the potential for thousands if not millions more to benefit from Peter’s legacy.

**Author**



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Kaufman was a founding member.