

Teaching About Sex and Sexualities in Higher Education

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BOOK REVIEW

TEACHING ABOUT SEX AND SEXUALITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Hillock, S. (2021). *Teaching About Sex and Sexualities in Higher Education*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Pages: 345. Price: CDN 80.00 (hardcover).

In the preface to her fine edited text, Hillock submits the proposition that research on sex, sexualities, and sex education has advanced substantially in disciplines such as psychology and public health, women's studies, queer studies, and disability studies; but that significant gaps have remained in her own field (social work), and other practitioner preparation programs within the helping professions. She recounts her own training as a medical social worker in the 1990s and the dearth of resources to draw upon to respond to patient questions about these topics. In her view, these lacunae have persisted far too long, leading her to convene an impressive, diverse, and multidisciplinary cadre of scholars within a single text—the first of its kind in North America—to offer “discussion of current debates and hot topics, celebrate multidisciplinary and diversity, and [offer] practical application and recommendations, particularly for those academics responsible for training students to eventually work with vulnerable populations as well as the general public” (pp. IX–X).

Centering Canadian scholars and context, Hillock and colleagues engage with both longstanding and newer issues and questions in the subject area, informed by the most recent and relevant scholarly and professional work. The text holds three main sections, each containing six chapters on their themes: “Current Debates and Hot Topics,” “At the Margins: Diverse Voices and Perspectives,” and “Practical Applications and Recommendations.” Aside from the frontmatter and section introductions, Hillock also wrote the first chapter, “Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell: Sexuality(ies),

Instructor Disclosure, and Trigger Warnings in the Classroom,” in which she lifts up the contributions of Indigenous, racialized, queer, and Black feminist scholars and their critical interrogation of the seminal literature in her field and others, critiquing “classic feminism for heteronormativity, cisgenderism, and ‘whitewashing’,” [and introducing] “anti-racist, anticolonial, and queer approaches” (p. 21). She notes how such intersectional lenses afford progress in reforming sexual education to foster agency rather than reifying constraints, particularly among people marginalized, ignored, and/or harmed by such exclusion. Hillock describes her early beliefs and training and shares about classroom experiences and incidents to illustrate the complexity of teaching about sex and sexuality to students who share many of the same hang-ups, traumas, and fears as their future clients or patients. She also bravely troubles conventions of trigger warnings, arguing that interests in preventing harm in the learning process can unintentionally encourage avoidance behaviors. Given her nuanced discussion, readers would be well served to access the book directly since a review—with its word limitations—can’t sufficiently convey this valuable discussion. The remaining chapters in the first section deal with important topics such as Indigenous sexuality, teaching sexual consent, engaging boys and men in prosocial approaches to sexuality, sex positivity, and Transgender experiences in healthcare. All of these chapters are written by well-regarded Canadian scholars who provide valuable insights in an accessible and actionable manner.

The second section focuses on diverse voices and per-

spectives exploring sex and sexuality in relation to various social identities, communities, and disciplinary perspectives. These include examination of Queer and Feminist study of pornography, comparative historical perspectives on sex, queer(ing) masculinities in early childhood education, and work with Muslim LGBTQ service users. The chapters are well written, engaging, intelligent, and sometimes moving, and this reviewer found the last chapter in this section—written by Renee Dumaesque—to be especially rich in its theoretical and practical navigation, dismantling of dominant views and discourses on sex and sexuality. Dumaesque's autoethnographic perspectives and experiences as a "white non-binary settler with chronic vulvar pain, also known as vulvodynia" (p. 198) are utilized to inform scholarship and teaching about intersectional examination of sexuality, arguing (among many valuable arguments in the chapter) that "...autoethnography methodology, deployed from a transdisciplinary orientation, provides the tools to support layered analysis in service to intersectional mad/crip coalitions" (p. 199). Dumaesque concludes that

it is imperative that sexuality education facilitate[s] processes that historicize harm to defamiliarize what and who is subjugated according to deviance and dysfunction. Intersectional analysis can support students to unpack how medical and psychiatric categories of sexuality, madness, and disability, as well as queer, mad, and crip political movements, are formed in relation to white supremacist settler colonial sanist/ableist heteropatriarchy, [and how] ...autoethnography, by inverting the researcher's gaze, can propel students to read themselves in and through reading critical scholarship. (p. 207)

The beauty and possibilities of a critical classroom are well articulated here, and guidance is provided by modeling disclosure by the author in relation to the subject matter to animate autoethnographic methods in ways that are inclusive, restorative, educational, and liberatory. Here again, a review does limited justice to the contents of the chapters generally, and Dumaesque's chapter especially.

The final section focuses on applications and future directions for progressing sex and sexuality education (and research). These chapters cover lessons learned and recommendations around sex and gender issues and experiences in the classroom, teaching sexuality across various levels in higher education, targeted methods of value for sexual health education for and/or about individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, approaches to

developing sexual education workshops. Hillock's closing chapter summarizes contributions within the text and offers guidance about challenges and approaches to teaching and discussions about sex and sexuality in the classroom. She aptly reminds readers about the limited preparation and substantial hesitation—especially within professional programs and helping professions—to teach about sex and sexuality despite the pervasive and significant importance of the topic in people's lives. Hillock again calls out "sex negativity, cisgenderism, and heteronormativity," (p. 301) and for "fill[ing] gaps in higher education, demonstrate[ing] the need for multidisciplinary approaches to this area of study, and encourage[ing] real talk (and teaching) about sex and sexuality(ies) in the classroom," (p. 301). She highlights distinctions between sex positive versus sex-negative approaches to teaching and professional practices, barriers associated with teaching about these topics, development of comfort and familiarity with explicit discussion and terminology such as colloquial names for sexual activities and parts of the body used by clients and students, and disclosures by clients and students about their experiences with sexual practices, violence, and trauma (among other related things). Hillock also provides some practical lists containing possible components of sex education content and teaching methods for consideration that are also useful for informing further research.

Overall, this text fulfills its promise in terms of filling gaps and providing actionable guidance for research, education in and outside classrooms, and practitioner work in the associated fields. Critical writing is often inaccessible, hampered by impenetrable theoretical jargon and abstraction. Hillock and colleagues, however, manage to traverse an impressively wide range of relevant topics and identities in a legible and beneficial manner.

As an ethnographic researcher whose current projects focus on sexual consent communication and fostering sexual agency among university students, this reviewer found many treasures to draw upon to advance this work. Susan Hillock is to be lauded for gathering such an impressive community of thoughtful experts to assemble this notable contribution to the disciplines and professions.