

**Review: Teaching Outside the Box:
How to Grab Your Students by Their Brains**

By LouAnne Johnson. Jossey-Bass, 2015. 320 pp.

Jieun Kim and Corinne Ehrfurth, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Johnson is no stranger to publication. Most famous for *My Posse Don't Do No Homework*—the basis of the film *Dangerous Minds*—her numerous additional titles include *Teaching Outside the Box: How to Grab Your Students by Their Brains*, which offers both personal and practical ideas for success in the classroom. Now in its third edition, Johnson's book asks the question, "Why do so many teacher candidates ace their education courses, read all the latest journals, carefully observe good teachers, shine like stars during their student teaching, and then crash and burn during their first year in the classroom?" (p. 17). By weaving this question throughout the book, she presents advice and ideas based on student success as a priority. In fact, she notes that the book is an "imaginary conversation" with teachers in an "attempt to share everything I have learned about effective teaching in one practical package" (p. xiv), a conversation asking all of us, regardless of teaching discipline, to look introspectively for what we want our students to know when they leave our classes and how we want to get them there.

At first glance, these eleven chapters seem geared toward future teachers, but Johnson makes sure that both beginning and experienced teachers can benefit from their contents. For example, before addressing specific pedagogies, she identifies three fluid categories of teachers--good, excellent, and super--categories dependent on "personal strengths, intimate relationships, professional goals, and individual priorities" (p. 7). This section speaks primarily to the introspective pre-service teachers who must "consider how much time and emotional energy you can afford to spend on your work outside the home" (p. 8). Frankly, Johnson suggests, it's acceptable to choose to be a "good" teacher because "you will still be contributing to society, performing honorable and necessary work, and helping to shape the future of our country," as long as you don't fall into inexcusable mediocre or terrible teaching (p. 10). Pre-service teachers will benefit from considering

the contents of this section before entering their own classrooms because, quite often, observed classroom experiences can be slightly skewed and, at times, predicted to be idealistic. Observing a seasoned teacher's classroom management and organization may lead to believing that their own classrooms will run as smoothly.

Another valuable consideration is the teaching philosophy, which shapes every decision within the classroom. One might even argue that a teaching philosophy should be considered before setting foot into a classroom because it carries such weight. With that in mind, Johnson warns that "If you enter your classroom with a clear idea of why you are there and what you expect from yourself and your students, you stand a much better chance of being a successful teacher" (p. 15). This philosophy will likely include beliefs about how students learn, practices that influence learning, and specific, yet overarching, goals for student learning. This philosophy will also draw out the internal factors such as prejudices, personal agendas, and respect can influence a teacher as an individual. By having a clear understanding and plan for addressing or at least acknowledging these factors, teachers can focus on pedagogy and creating relationships with their students.

Once inside the physical space of the classroom, teachers of all levels can benefit from strategies to prepare the room, the paperwork, and themselves. Again, Johnson asks for introspection. While drawing attention to the importance of sensory details, seating arrangements, supply and paperwork organization, and personal appearance and attitude, Johnson avoids imposing a prescriptive agenda herself. In fact, she lists a number of questions for instructors to consider as they prepare their classrooms, such as "Which seating arrangements did you prefer as a child? Which do you prefer as a teacher?" or "What can new teachers do if they have mild personalities and want to develop an air of authority?" or even "What can teachers do to counteract the emotional and physical stress that accompanies teaching?" (p. 95). In other words, do what feels right for you and your students. Actually, one piece of prescriptive advice does emerge: new teachers will often be given the advice not to smile before Christmas to reduce and possibly eliminate discipline issues and classroom management problems. As someone who received this advice, it seemed counter-intuitive. I know the advice was well-meaning, but personally the idea of not smiling before Christmas would have meant

presenting an inauthentic version of myself and that seemed like a greater risk than a student thinking I was too nice. However, Johnson challenges this idea and even encourages smiles. After all, “the opportunity to create a good impression, to connect with your students, will pass very quickly,” and when challenging moments happen, people are more likely to respond positively when faced with a smile (p. 98). Establishing a positive rapport can go a long way in establishing expectations and teaching procedures, leading to greater productivity throughout the remainder of the school year.

In order to maintain this positive energy, teachers must remember that discipline is necessary, which requires them to consider their true purpose in disciplining students: punishing an action for punishment’s sake or guiding a student to make better choices. Johnson proposes approaching discipline with both logic and respect in mind: the consequence should be logical in connection to the student’s action, and the teaching must maintain a high degree of respect for the student. By defining a clear philosophy specific to discipline, teachers can consider how to move forward. Discipline, expectations, rules, and procedures are all a necessary part of a classroom in their own way, and when used effectively, these pieces allow students to be more successful in the classroom, and ultimately, outside the classroom as well.

When Johnson turns to pedagogy, she seems to focus with prejudice on English/Language Arts. Indeed, she speaks the truth when she argues that “Every teacher is a reading teacher, like it or not” (p. 177), and turns to attracting students to difficult texts, such as poetry and Shakespeare. Still, she acknowledges various reasons that students may not be so eager to read in class, including social awkwardness, lack of comprehension, and minimal interest in required reading. With each reason discussed, she offers suggestions, such as offering choice in reading, even with class texts, and the willingness to abandon a class text if students are not interested in the reading. This is certainly a new idea, but if pre-reading work is done well, the students may choose not to abandon the class text. While it makes sense that the chapter is geared toward ELA teachers since they are the individuals tasked with teaching reading, if every teacher is in fact a teacher of reading, more time and attention should be spent here. But with an ELA

background, Johnson does not share what teaching reading looks like in other content areas, which is a definite shortcoming.

When turning to educational influences in later chapters, Johnson offers some interesting and unusual ideas. For example, she asks that we pay attention to natural and artificial lighting. After explaining scotopic sensitivity syndrome, a type of light sensitivity, Johnson shares common symptoms and the potential for colored overlays as a way of coping. She also shares how nutrition may support or impede success in the classroom. In many cases, common ingredients such as high fructose corn syrup and aspartame harm the developing body and brain, but ultimately, it is up to parents to be informed about what to feed their children. Therefore, Johnson suggests helping students to educate their parents by working together to write shopping lists of nutritious snacks and drinks and by incorporating exercise into classroom activities. Both topics, lighting and diet, seem out of place in the text because some factors fall out of the control of teachers who recognize that students deal with varying degrees of challenges. Some of these challenges we can work to alleviate in our interactions and practices, but others, like diet, we have very little influence on. Teachers must recognize that they cannot control whether or not students are putting processed snacks and meals into their bodies or choosing better options.

Johnson also discusses the potential and value of project-based learning, that is, a teaching method in which students acquire knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge. Within this discussion, she includes ideas for groups and project difficulty. Ultimately, offering students more control in their learning does have a positive impact on their learning and productivity in the classroom.

Johnson wraps up her final chapter with a healthy dose of positive stories from readers and updates on students who were the focus in *My Posse Don't Do No Homework*. Though ending on a positive note, these chapters don't add to the practicality of the book, and if readers are not familiar with Johnson's original story, these chapters fall short.

At first glance, it might be easy for a prospective reader to brush aside *Teaching Outside the Box* as just another “teacher book” because Johnson covers common topics. In fact, nearly all the topics covered are relevant to teachers regardless of grade level or content area, but it is the angle at which she approaches these common topics that makes this book valuable. Even when discussing topics like preparation and paperwork, the rationale behind her ideas always focuses on helping students succeed, and that is why teachers choose this profession. This is different from many other “teacher books” that focus on being student centered in regards to lessons and convenience for teachers when it comes to preparation and paperwork. This unique focus makes Johnson’s *Teaching Outside the Box: How to Grab Your Students by Their Brains* a worthwhile read for educators.