

*On Teacher Neutrality: Politics, Praxis, and Performativity*, edited by Daniel P. Richards. University Press of Colorado, 2020, 291 pp.

*Reviewed by Kaustav Mukherjee, Gannon University*

In *On Teacher Neutrality: Politics, Praxis, and Performativity*, editor Daniel Richards presents an assortment of pedagogical approaches in higher education, focused specifically on composition pedagogy. The chapters in this collection examine the possibility (or not) and necessity (or not) of political and social neutrality in such spaces. These chapters highlight a range of approaches, foci, and practices, but each of them refers to at least one other chapter in the collection, thereby creating an interesting interconnectivity in the discussions.

In her foreword, Patricia Roberts-Miller asserts that only an indifferent bystander who is not impacted by the outcome of a contentious issue can afford to be neutral (xi). In a way, Roberts-Miller suggests that an instructor's position of neutrality indicates disinterest in engaging in critical thinking in the very space where critical insights are supposed to be cultivated and nurtured. She provokes readers by asking them to consider if they "care" enough to be not neutral on issues that may have impact on lives.

Richards clarifies his position about "teacher neutrality" in the introduction by claiming that it is "terrible" in multiple ways (3). He refers to the American Association of University Professors 2007 report on "Freedom in the Classroom" to argue that a genuinely balanced system is impossible (4). Denial of non-neutrality can be an oppressive hindrance to growth and interpersonal understanding in politically polarized dialogic spaces.

The chapters of this book are organized into three thematic sections: Politics, Praxis, and Performativity. In the first section, "Politics", the authors of the five chapters examine how the power position of instructors impacts their decision of displaying neutrality (or not) when the display might come across as disruptive to the standards set by institutions. In the first chapter "The Limits of Neutrality," author Meaghan Brewer argues that graduate students, especially women, often adopt a neutral position and ground their pedagogy in textbooks because that is the non-controversial middle and safe space (27). She provides some recommendations on how new graduate instructors can use multimodal pedagogical methods, like video recording their class sessions, to recognize how they can "play their identities" (39) authentically without making controversial discussions uncomfortable for students. In the second chapter of section 1, Jason Evans' "Living in Contradiction" focuses on his experience of two-year colleges where social class, race, and language can potentially become barriers to learning (41). In a two-year col-

lege, he often teaches first-generation college students. Usage of non-standard English in academic contexts disrupts the institutional expectation of standard academic English. For a long time, capitalism has valued a standard communicative pattern that provided smooth communicative exchanges in the corporate world thereby ignoring student ownership of their language. Acceptance of a certain version of English is the position of least resistance—of neutrality.

Jessica Clements' "Walking the Narrow Ridge" conducts a discourse analysis of students' reflective essays to argue that students struggle with the juxtaposition of faith in composition pedagogy (55). Abiding by the expectations of Christian universities to integrate faith-based learning into composition courses can be problematic for some untenured instructors when faith-infused pedagogy does not necessarily align with disciplinary worldview. Can faith be conducive to a pedagogy that encourages doubt and critical questioning? Like Evans, Clements does not provide a solution.

Clements' concerns about the risk of disruption being too high is further carried forward by Robert Samuels in his chapter "Contingent Faculty, Student Evaluation, and Pedagogical Neutrality." In the fourth chapter of section one, Samuels agrees with Richards that although true neutrality may be impossible, some degree of neutrality is required to avoid disruptions in academia. Founded on the theories of Descartes and Freud, Samuels claims that one can never really be truly neutral since neutrality stems from pre-existing biases (72). The instructor's lack of neutrality reflects in class evaluations since students often find non-neutral views to be didactic. This chapter provides a logical response to a common criticism against higher education that instructors use their powers to indoctrinate students in any way of thinking.

The second section of this book, "Praxis", provides instructional perspectives and guides for fostering meaningful non-neutral conversations in class (97). The next set of chapters explore examples of how instructors reacted to certain situations. In "Strangers on Their Own Campus," Kelly Blewett and her student Tyler S. recount the development of their meaningful relationship as instructor and student. Their mutual trust helped the student engage in conversations and understanding with peers who have political views different from his own as he transitioned from the life of a Marine to a normal first year college student. Blewett argues that his willingness to listen and understand without feigning neutrality strengthened their trust.

While Blewett's article is about learning to manage biases with others, the next chapter by Christopher Michael Brown, "Believing Critically," is about learning to manage internal biases (113). He alludes to James Berlin's theoretical analogy of how a transparent window provides an interpretation of reality outside but not a timeless truth. Students need to be critical but receptive.

Brown describes an assignment that challenges students to move away from their ideological commitments and be uncomfortable and insightful in the process of creating brilliant research. Lauren F. Lichy and Karen Rosenberg in chapter eight, “Ideology through Process and Slow-Start Pedagogy,” create resistance by challenging students to contribute to discussions on risqué topics such as gender (128). Students initially resist but are pushed towards making connections with their lived experiences. Lichy and Rosenberg provide a thorough description of the units and activities to demonstrate how students successfully made their way through the initial struggles of coming to terms with biases (129). They call it the “slow-start pedagogy” where resistance is nuanced, effective, and not in the face. The chapter ends with a reflection on the success of the assignment and provides an answer to some of the questions that other authors, like Evans and Clements, had regarding the risks of non-neutrality. Like Brown, Lichy and Rosenberg provide slow and steady nudges pushing students to move away from their comfortable position of neutrality (or nonchalance) to critically explore and disrupt the status quo. Through gently nuanced non-neutrality, the authors succeed in making their resistance against oppression and non-inclusion more visible to students without making them uncomfortable. They are also able to strongly align their stance to their institutional mission that generally value social justice and inclusion.

Similar to how Lichy and Rosenberg challenge the students’ position of neutrality through the exploration of gender, Mara Holt creates a similar move to challenge students by asking them to explore questions related to race in chapter ten of the second section, “It Depends on the Context” (162). Some students refused to do some of her exercises. Interestingly, there was also an act of resistance by instructors (knowing well that non-neutrality might impact their career) and a refusal to commit the act of disruption by students (who are encouraged to move away from neutrality to be rewarded with better grades).

In the third section of the book, “Performativity”, the five chapters explore pedagogical practices in situations where feigning neutrality is not possible. These chapters explore neutrality in pedagogical spaces where the marginalized bodies of the instructors create complex power dynamics. Instructors who are underrepresented in academia due to their gender, race, sexuality, and religion are automatically considered to have a stance on issues that impact them directly. Non-neutrality is automatically aligned with their identities. Marginality can be used as a strength in such cases. In chapter thirteen, “Encounters with Friction,” Romeo García and Yndalecio Isaac Hinojosa take us to the part of the book that explores the performativity of neutrality. Their identity automatically creates some assumptions about them as instructors (207). The authors choose to define their performance of non-alignment to the expectations of monolithic White academia as moments of “friction” instead of resistance

(208). Resistance denotes negativity and disruptiveness whereas friction is a natural experience that results from an interaction. The authors provide a list of classroom experiences where these frictions result in new experiences for both the educator and the student.

In chapter fourteen, “Turning Resistances into Engagement”, Erika Johnson and Tawny Tullia argue that instructors can use their “otherness” to create space for excellent conversations on non-neutral topics (221). While using the word privilege with much care and stripping it of any association with superiority or entitlement, they argue that their marginal identities facilitate spaces for engagement in productive, exciting, conflicting, and diverse conversations in their composition classrooms.

After the rich and interwoven articles that define neutrality and show examples of how the contested non-neutral spaces can generate fertile critical thinking, Richards’ concluding chapter describes implications of these conversations for composition pedagogy (269).

The book encourages a politically savvy and responsible pedagogy in composition classrooms by urging teachers to keep in mind that resistance can come both from students and the administrators. The collection of experiences and perspectives gives instructors, especially graduate students, non-tenured faculty, and instructors of marginalized identities, the tools to create non-neutral pedagogic spaces where differences are explored and discussed. The book seems to shame any instructors who chose neutrality in the classroom and, in doing so, ignores possibilities that not all instructors, however skilled in their subject, are confident extroverts. Additionally, some university administrators give more importance to student evaluations than they should. How can instructors avoid being accused of cowardice or pretentiousness if non-neutrality can be risky at some points in their professional life? Readers mostly hear stories of success in these chapters. It might be helpful to know more about instances where non-neutrality might have backfired and recommendations on how things could have been handled better.

*Erie, Pennsylvania*