

Book Review / Compte rendu

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A Pedagogy of Surprise: Exploring Gifts, Wonder, and Gratitude in Curricular Settings by
Keith W. Brown. SUNY Press, 2025, 315 pages. ISBN:9798855801262 (eBook)

Through a long-term educational pattern defined by standardized testing, rigid rubrics, and commodification of learning, Keith W. Brown's book, *A Pedagogy of Surprise*, challenges the traditional notion of "exchange" by refuting its underlying concept of "gift and gratitude". Integrating with holistic education, Zen Buddhist philosophy, and cognitive learning science, Brown (2025) offers a comprehensive roadmap for educators for the core of the pedagogical path.

Why Does the Exchange Paradigm Not Apply to Modern Education?

Brown (2025) refutes the traditional notion of transactional "exchange" by a philosophical framework that in an educational situation, students or learners are regarded as "paid customers / consumers" (p. 118) to obtain credential and satisfaction (Collins, 2019). Such a transactional exchange paradigm forces students to achieve their goals on profitability, prestige, and rankings. In this case, classroom environment becomes rigid and stagnant because students are struggling to pass the exams while tea-

chers are only monitoring grades and learning performance. This book points out that current transactional models in classroom stifles creativity and leads to an environment with mistrust. Brown argues that predictability in a classroom instruction such as rigid curricula restrain "unexpected and often unpredictable journey" (p. 27), causing anxiety, burnout, and burden in learning and teaching. Thus, the transactional exchange paradigm refers to unhealthy relationships between teachers and students, generating unfair competition or insufficient motivation.

"Surprise" Applied in Classroom as A Core Component

Brown (2025) proposes "Surprise" as a pedagogical paradigm for guiding traditional teaching journey against a "disenchantment", where rituals are disordered, utility is reduced, and education is stereotyped as a pursuit of certification and profitability. He reimagines a new educational model for exploration of surprise, creativity, and the relational dimensions of teaching and learning in the present education. "Surprise" is

defined as an essential component of the teaching path that arises from a sense of initial disorientation when a lesson plan diverges from planned syllabus. Rather than being a merely random accident, “Surprise” is also a “state of mind that can be actively fostered” (p. 8) and used as a tool to rediscover the awe and wonder inherent in a classroom. Brown (2025) suggests that utilitarianism in learning environment should cater to the “four pillars: Receptivity, Empathy, Discovery, and Trust” (pp. 80-81), helping teachers and students improve their engagement in interaction.

Based on cognitive science, Brown (2025) emphasizes that “Surprise” tends to provide causality and unintended moments to allow unpredictable subjectivities to occur in classroom, because humans are inclined to unexpected violations that can enhance memory and retention. He argues that it could be transformative to break a solid habitual situation so that teachers and students in classroom can interact more frequently and create more meaningful time without deliberate purposes.

A Transition to the Gift Paradigm

Contrary to a transactional exchange paradigm which focuses on profitability, prestige, and rankings, “a gift paradigm” (p. 115) is advocated to prioritize humanity’s inherent abundance and critical thinking in contemporary education. Brown (2025) suggests that the classroom should be regarded as a “living classroom” (p. 137) for wonder, spontaneous learning, and cycling gifts, serving as human’s initial ability of discovery, thinking, and exploring curiosity. “Living classroom” is a term coined by a philosopher, Christopher Bache (2008) to describe a place of collective energy or spirit where teachers and students can contribute to a shared spirit in mutual learning.

Authentic needs of learning and acquiring may be marginalized in traditional classroom. For instance, teachers’ enthusiasm and expectations may diminish when students struggle to make progress in the classroom (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It points out that teachers may experience tension between professional judgment and the expectation of gratitude to view every piece of student work as a gift.

Brown (2025) claims that teachers should be honest in evaluation and maintain a positive attitude toward student contributions. Thus, the framework of “the gift paradigm” encourages a teacher to relinquish a knowledgeable position as a “potentate” to a motivated participant for receiving unique things and adapting unexpected situation as irreplaceable gifts.

Navigating the “Gift Aporias”

The “gift paradigm”—though philosophically resonant in educational settings—conflicts with modern institutions that demand predictability. This negative side in gift-based education reveals a deficiency of teachers’ remuneration and uncertainty of students’ education guarantee in schools. To navigate the correct teaching path carefully, Brown (2025) proposes six “gift aporias” (pp. 233-251) as navigation for educational implementation. The six “gift aporias” described as the insoluble paradoxes suggest that teachers must maintain balance between attitudes towards students’ performance and teaching pressures within modern educational standards or disciplines. Thus, Brown (2025) highlights that the “gift paradigm” should be a continuous improvement and a sophisticated practice within teachers’ self-reflection instead of overwhelming expectations or a relaxing approach for a shift from transactional education.

The Tragic Side of Gratitude

Brown’s (2025) most significant contribution is the exploration of “Tragic Side of Gratitude” in Chapter 6, examining how gratitude shapes students’ engagement when they are in the shadow of loss or from “counterfactual thoughts” (p. 171) in modern education. It argues that “Tragic curriculums” could reframe learning setbacks in classroom for a promotion of specific qualities: “humility, contentedness, thankfulness, cooperation, and compassion” (pp. 183-186). Students are encouraged to experience more challenging learning experiences which can build character and improve motivation by avoiding too much joyfulness and pleasure that may decline their willpower. It indicates that although failures may impede students’ progress in learning journeys, high standards and a sense of responsibility tend to boost motivation, build

confidence, and provide opportunities in self-realization for students' growth.

Appraisal and Impact

A Pedagogy of Surprise is a remarkable significant scholarly contribution that integrates spiritual philosophy and guidance and educational theory. Brown (2025) reveals educational inequality that unnecessary stress may decrease learning efficiency, and claims that interaction between teachers and students becomes a systematic necessity. Teachers' emotional awareness can improve classroom atmosphere (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). It points out that teachers should adapt improvisation from students' performance to react with personal emotions by connecting to the social-emotional learning (SEL) principle, providing a safer and respectful classroom environment.

Brown's (2025) critiques how standardization in test-based education leads to teachers' concentration on monitoring grade or performance metrics rather than cultivating students' spontaneity, individuality, and curiosity. It significantly criticizes the "one size fits all mentality" as a human connection (Biesta, 2009). Brown (2025) explains that the loss of personalization of teaching methods ignores students' learning individuality, reducing diverse interaction in classroom. Moreover, he argues through the "gift aporias" that this book may serve as spiritual guide for teaching practitioners to reflect on challenges and sustain a positive mentality within a disciplined educational system.

CONCLUSION

Keith W. Brown has offered a well-organized pedagogy format that invites deeper reflection of teaching practice in wonder, surprise, and gratitude, pursuing a deep interaction between teachers and students. Through embracing four pillars and six gift aporias guided by seven practical visualizations, *A Pedagogy of Surprise* creates an ideal model for professional development, course curriculum design, and exploration of humanity. Against a transactional learning and teaching, education should be developed as a long-term, sharing, and reciprocal journey of exploration and growth in learning.

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