

## ***Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto***

Reviewed by  
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Author: Kevin M. Gannon  
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The curveballs thrown to us in 2020 have highlighted inequities in our culture and our need to harness adaptable pedagogy. The former is nothing new. The Working Group on Diversity & Inclusion for the Commission on Public Relations Education (2018) found that the demographics of the academy do not match the diversity found in PR practitioner communities. The working group made recommendations regarding forming a more diverse pipeline for PR higher education but also acknowledged that work must be done in the classroom to provide a more equitable educational experience. How, then, are we to juggle both the call for equality in both our culture and classrooms alongside the need to reformat our courses to shift modalities at a moment's notice? Many answers and suggestions can be found in Kevin M. Gannon's *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*.

Gannon's (2020) recommendation for grappling with these crises is to reject the act of teaching as a means for information transfer and embrace it as a more holistically transformative process. He urges the reader to reject the all-too-common "jaded detachment" (p. 3) found within the academic community and embrace the titular sense of "radical hope" that compels us to strive to create better futures for our students.

At first, this process doesn't seem particularly novel, since academe has long paid lip service to the liberal arts education as an educational process dedicated to educating the "whole person." What is truly novel—and appropriate for our present circumstances—is Gannon's insistence that we actually embody this notion in the classroom.

The property of "radical hope" is explained by Gannon (2020) in his introduction:

The very acts of trying to teach well, of adopting a critically reflective practice to improve our teaching and our students' learning, are *radical*, in that word's literal sense: they are endeavors aimed at fundamental, root-level transformation. And they are acts of *hope* because they imagine that process of transformation as one in which a better future takes shape out of our students' critical refusal to abide by the limitations of the present. (p. 5)

At the core of the "radical hope" paradigm of teaching is the concept of *praxis*. Gannon leans upon Paulo Freire's conceptualization of praxis as a blend of reflection and action. We should be continuously reflecting on our teaching practices and using our observations to update how we engage with our students. Driving home the point that "treating all students *equally* was not the same thing as treating all students *equitably*" (p. 30), Gannon (2020) pushes faculty to take a more active role in education, one in which the educator abandons the false idol of neutrality—"Neutrality is a luxury of the comfortable," he says (p. 21)—and intentionally prioritizes compassion and inclusion.

Dr. Gannon isn't new to these concepts. As a professor of history and director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa, Gannon has long been sounding a clarion call for an increased critical and inclusive pedagogy, making him distinctly suited to address the needs of higher education in

the current moment. He has traveled to campuses across North America as a consultant and speaker and was interviewed as part of Ava DuVernay's Oscar-nominated documentary *13th*. As COVID-19 forces us to reconsider long-entrenched teaching paradigms, and nationwide protests against systemic racism drive us to seek justice in how we serve our students, the principles Gannon lays out in his manifesto can play a big role in guiding us to these objectives.

### **Structure and Organization**

Gannon (2020) starts his work by listing the woes of higher education, such as suffering from financial struggles that are “the fruit of a neoliberal, market-driven ideology with little room for the notion of a public good” (p. 1). While he provides an array of examples to support this characterization, any reader who remains skeptical need only examine the scattershot “plans” to reopen campuses during a pandemic, the product of an optimism that can only come from willful ignorance.

After his introduction, Gannon devotes 10 chapters to exploring 10 specific educational principles or concepts that can be upheld as either aspirational beliefs or examples of a status quo begging to be torn down. The first chapter, “Classrooms of Death,” modernizes a phrase coined by N. F. S. Grundtvig to describe schools that offered an education irrelevant to the lives of most students. How then, Gannon asks, are we supposed to ensure that the education we offer contributes to the “life” of society, turning out individuals with not only knowledge but also a sense of civic responsibility and efficacy? Using the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville as a key example, Gannon charges educators to assert the incompatibility between white nationalism and the successful navigation of the academic sphere of higher education. Knowledge creation, Gannon argues, is insufficient for valuable higher education. The subsequent processes of analyzing and internalizing learned knowledge must also be guided by the professor. As Gannon (2020) states, “simply

introducing knowledge into the public sphere and then abdicating any role in what happens to it afterward is at best highly problematic; at worst, it's wildly irresponsible" (p. 16). This emphasis on actively investing in both the student and the learning process is also manifest in the next chapter, which focuses on communication of expectations in everyday teaching practice. It is in this chapter that Gannon begins to craft his argument that the idealized form of the professor as a wise orator must give way to a more compassionate figure. Proudly exclaiming that a course requires a certain caliber of student—especially in blind devotion to the idea of “rigor”—does not represent an earnest investment in students' futures.

In each subsequent chapter, Gannon continues the case for actively sowing the seeds for transformative learning. He takes special care to urge the reader toward inclusivity by actively challenging them to consider how even widely accepted teaching practices may exclude students with disabilities or those who come from nontraditional backgrounds. The text also challenges the reader to avoid some of the cultural pitfalls found in teaching higher education. For example, while venting about students in closed-door meetings may have a cathartic benefit, it can spiral out of control and cement the notion of an adversarial relationship between professor and student. On that note, Gannon points out the current trend of faculty members subtweeting their students by pointing out their more absurd behavior in a virtual public space. While it may promote a foxhole camaraderie amongst educators, what does it communicate to the students who stumble across these objects of ridicule—especially the students whose work or confusion is being displayed for all to mock?

The areas ripe for praxis are numerous, and Gannon identifies them in the elements of our profession both technical and traditional. By pointing out how the digital platforms we use may isolate certain students, he encourages faculty to develop curricula that utilize the platforms to their full extent, offering different types of learning experiences for

students to utilize and minimizing technical issues that may exclude certain students. To accomplish this, he advocates implementing universal design for learning (UDL) principles. Additionally, Gannon devotes an entire chapter to the syllabus and how it communicates a host of expectations to students beyond its text. The current emphasis on syllabus-as-legal-document is counterproductive, he insists, advocating for the “promising syllabus” approach pioneered by Ken Bain instead. “The promising syllabus has student learning, not instructors or institutions, firmly at its center. This is a subtle, seemingly simple shift, but one that has extraordinary consequences” (Gannon, 2020, p. 99).

Gannon’s final chapter focuses on three specific words that can dramatically change the classroom: “I don’t know.” Pointing out the pandemic of imposter syndrome found in the academy, he argues that admitting the lack of knowledge on a particular subject fosters a more collaborative relationship between professors and students, demonstrating that not knowing an answer—and subsequently finding it—is healthier than pretending to know it all along. Removing the academic pomp and circumstance and sense of detachment encourages us to wield our pedagogy as a gift, not a weapon.

### **Contribution to Higher Education, Especially in Public Relations**

Written in a tone that is startlingly succinct, yet resonant with raw emotion, Gannon’s points are amplified by his tone of strong, even forceful, optimism. He takes care to encourage the reader as he goes through his points, chipping away at the calcified resentment and despair that is all too common among educators. Even when challenging the reader, Gannon’s focus on edification and a mutual goal with the reader discourages any defensive objections from taking hold.

The work is further aided by the timing of its release. Shortly after publication, COVID-19 upended everything we thought we could expect from a semester. Suddenly, many of us were faced with a

teaching modality we had never planned to use. All of us had to make decisions regarding the balance of rigor and compassion in the midst of circumstances we hadn't anticipated. Shortly after that, the nationwide protests against systemic racism elevated a conversation long overdue in every discipline, including and especially public relations. Gannon's work provides elements of a blueprint that can help us avoid simply using the present events as case study fodder and move toward an educational paradigm pointed at intentional inclusivity. It has certainly encouraged this reviewer to abandon the false pretense of "neutrality" when teaching PR and work to form students who will be most likely to make positive, significant contributions to our world's social health.

The impact of Gannon's points are assisted by the work's length. He describes it as a "manifesto," and the term proves accurate, as *Radical Hope* is a short work that many could complete in a day. The book avoids wasting pages working up to a point too slowly. Instead, the reader is welcomed with rapidly developing arguments that build on the core calls for inclusivity, compassion, and praxis in pedagogy.

The brevity is a double-edged sword, however, as Gannon can move on to the next point while leaving the reader wanting to explore the previous argument in more detail. This is most apparent when discussing UDL, as Gannon only provides one concrete example of a UDL practice: formatting material to be easily parsed by screen readers for the blind. While a fantastic example of something readily accomplishable before the next semester, this reviewer was left curious for more examples, even as far as to pause reading the book to go seek out more avenues for UDL. Even brief mentions of techniques to accommodate spectrums other than those involving people with disabilities would have strengthened the argument. For example, Gannon could have explored UDL techniques meant to accommodate students without reliable access to the internet, which would have been remarkably prescient given the COVID-19

pandemic.

There is no shortage of prescriptive works aiming to improve either the performance or lives of those serving in higher education, making it all the more rare when a book stands out to the degree that *Radical Hope* does. The book could not have been released at a more ideal time, making it required reading for those of us struggling to figure out how to adjust and balance our work this fall. At times both challenging and affirming, *Radical Hope* provides a clear path to helping us tackle the present and adapt to the future.

#### References

Commission on Public Relations Education. (2018). *Fast forward: Foundations + future state. Educators + practitioners: The Commission on Public Relations Education 2017 report on undergraduate education*. <http://www.commissionpred.org/commission-reports/fast-forward-foundations-future-state-educators-practitioners/>