Foreword

In one of his characteristically quotable aphorisms, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1983) observes, “The years teach much which the days never know” (p. 253). Understood in the context of his essay “Experience,” the words are not, as sometimes popularly noted, a quip about hindsight providing perfect vision. Rather, this quote exhorts us to have faith that well-intentioned and well-executed efforts will eventually bear fruit, even if we cannot immediately see their impact. In reading this volume, Emerson’s wisdom comes to mind again and again.

Of course, in many ways, the existence of this book is its own fruitful harvest. Educators from around the world have engaged a unifying theme of sharing culturally responsive practices and intercultural communication approaches to help build new bridges between institutions of higher education and the increasingly diverse populations they strive to serve. True to the book’s own orientation, chapters represent a wide range of settings, topics, and populations. Authors hail from places as varied as South Africa, Texas, Australia, and New York. Large and small institutions are represented; places that serve traditional, non-traditional, local, and international students in both the professions and the liberal arts and sciences are also included. In addition, particularly at the editors’ home institution where many faculty engaged the project, we also imagine that the process of developing submissions stimulated rich, locally contextualized conversations about the importance of these issues. For those involved, the success of the effort is already clearly evident; they have reaped the fruits of their labors.

Yet Emerson calls us to something deeper, something beyond basking in a sense of accomplishment, however merited, that ensues from completing a worthy project. He reminds us that the impact of our labors can never be fully known during our own lifetimes because in a complex world our efforts are not easily measured, tend to be hidden by a variety of countervailing factors, and are only gradually adopted, even by people who greet our work with enthusiasm and hope. But if faculty research is grounded in a sense of moral purpose, Emerson argues that its impact will multiply over the course of years.

It is this long-term moral vision for helping to foster the well-being of communities that sticks with us as we read the pieces in this volume. We congratulate the authors and editors for shedding worn out practices and tired assumptions, for rethinking higher education’s role in meaningfully connecting students to the larger community. Despite intentions by many faculty to create the kinds of learning environments and opportunities that will foster a more respectful and equitable world, the reality remains that most faculty are products of elitist academic environments where social class, gender and privilege continue to impose a narrow set of cultural and behavioral expectations. Only by consciously examining and analyzing our assumptions and beliefs, as the authors of these chapters do, can we counteract the implicit indoctrination that faculty members are still subject to as a result of their long apprenticeship in our educational systems.
Foreword

Certainly, the efforts evident here of authors closely studying their practices and critically examining their biases and assumptions have resulted in improvements, prompting transformation in how participants engage teaching and learning. What the authors in this volume offer are not small changes; if adopted and sustained, their practices could result in educational improvements both now and in the future.

In fact, the work documented in this volume could reflect the beginning of deep changes across higher education, changes whose impact “the years will teach” but that our current days do not yet know. The authors included here offer glimpses into what some of those changes might look like. For us, examples like the following are entirely within the realm of the possible:

As our students increasingly attend institutions where their voices are valued, they might be more inclined to use their voices to speak out against injustice and to insist that other voices be heard.

As our pedagogies increasingly embrace more inclusive and constructivist orientations, the higher education sector could become an active participant in building societies committed to democratic practices.

As our faculty embrace the kind of critical self-reflection so evident in this volume, modeling what it means to be active questioners of our assumptions, we may find it easier across societies to tap into the deeply human desire to connect with, to nurture, and to love our fellow beings.

A tall order, yes, for one volume, but as part of an overall international effort, quite feasible over the years. If faculty commit to the philosophies and practices offered here, time will demonstrate to future generations that educators in the early 21st century ushered in a striking change, a change that helped us not only better prepare students with essential skills and knowledge but also helped us build a stronger democracy. That democracy will emerge thanks to the moral and ethical practices that are so assiduously taught and so eagerly learned through a project like this one, positively altering the quality of life in all of our communities, especially those most in need.

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