



Education Review

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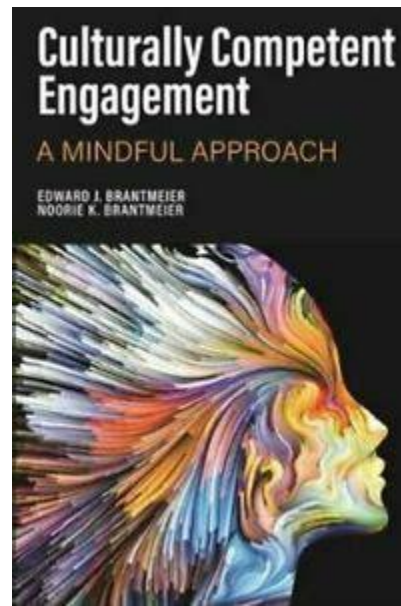
Brantmeier, E. J., & Brantmeier, N. K. (2020). *Culturally competent engagement: A mindful approach*. Information Age Publishing.

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What does it mean to be culturally competent? Rather than a final state of being, it is a *sustained process of learning* and a will and *willingness* to build understanding between people with different cultural perspectives, ultimately promoting relational justice. The book *Culturally Competent Engagement* is the culmination of more than 20 years of discussions between two authors about the journey and process of cultural competency. Cultural competence is more than being respectful of other cultures; it is the ability to understand, communicate with, and interact with people from other cultures. Such an ability inherently requires a level of mindfulness – an increasingly common term in pop culture and academia alike. While mindfulness often conjures notions of “living in the moment,” at least in the worlds of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and cultural training, mindfulness is a core concept for a very different reason: how can we understand the cultures of others if we fail to understand the baggage we bring to interactions with others due to our own cultural conditioning? With this question in mind, the authors of this book advance a reflective approach to fostering culturally responsive behavior and engagement, moving beyond organizational and systems-level approaches to center the intentional study of the self and the systems that individuals operate within.



The volume's authors, Edward J. and Noorie K. Brantmeier, have backgrounds in international education and have published on the subjects of multicultural education (Brantmeier & Lawrence, 2013), multiculturalism and DEI (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2015), and systems-level thinking in learning organizations (Liu et al., 2019). Both are professors in the Learning Technology and Leadership Education Department of James Madison University and also happen to be spouses who maintain a multicultural, multi-ethnic home of multiple generations.

It is notable that one of the authors is a Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) scholar: Noorie Brantmeier has personal experience working with a 50% Native-owned consulting firm and brings forward Indigenous ways of knowing that enhance conversations about multiculturalism. In this volume, both authors do not shy away from providing small snapshots of their own failings and mistakes. These glimpses humanize them and show that multicultural competence truly is a journey and not a state that is reached, but a process that must always be refined. Consequently, the book advances a central theme of humility: humility of the self, and of one's cultural values.

Relatedly, *Culturally Competent Engagement* is based on a premise of humans as cultural beings. Mindful cultural engagement is an attitude and approach of self-awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and an awareness of oneself *as* a cultural being. It is very holistic text that incorporates not only an argument in favor of the value of reflexiveness towards thoughts and feelings (particularly feelings such as bias and discomfort) but also the assertion that bodily sensations are valued indicators of these discomforts, feelings, and thoughts. Just as the text is very holistically integrative of the whole body – not facilitating a division between body and mind – it is also integrative of the self with its social and cultural environments. Intercultural competence, as a process (rather than an end-all goal) interacts with the self, other, and systems levels of existence. The foundation for the entire book *is* a self-other-systems approach.

The text is heavily rooted in the idea of mindfulness, though *mindfulness* means different things for the authors, and they are candid in recognizing that it likely means different things to each of their readers. One author practices meditation and martial arts. The other uses their connection to Native American spiritual practices and mindfulness. In both cases, the authors advocate daily nonjudgmental awareness and metacognition exercises as part of a lived commitment to mindfulness. Yet this is not to say that the authors advocate a detached or enlightened perspective. They clearly discuss the idea of *joy* in discovering one's own perspectives, relating to others, and gaining a better understanding of how others feel and what they value. Interestingly, the authors also describe mindful cultural engagement as akin to observing a quiet knowledge in an objective way, though they do not maintain a dominant objectiveness throughout the book, and instead prioritize reflective and reflexive strategies for holistic understanding *and* feeling.

Intended to be practical and easily put to use, the volume was written to help people forge authentic connections without minimizing differences or creating false notions of uniformity. This goal is based on the underlying premise that multicultural difference is a strength achieved through the extensive integration of theory and practical exercises. A brief overview of the book's contents illustrates the degree to which it contains practical, reflective, and personal application recommendations. The volume begins with an introduction to the self-other-systems approach, as well as key terms. Chapter 2 focuses on self-understanding and dives into the idea of the self as a cultural being, while Chapters 3 and 4 return to theory to discuss the value of appreciating and learning cultural differences at the micro and macro levels of analysis. Chapter 5 integrates the ideas of self-other-systems understanding and learning as a lifelong journey.

In the first three chapters, where Brantmeier and Brantmeier center the importance of the individual in systems-level change by articulating the roles of intention and motivation in self-discovery and the progression toward greater cultural competency. This conversation subtly communicates a darker side of intentionality: that division, segmentation, and difference can also be used by people to create self-privileging systems of dependence and exploitation. This argument will resonate with readers familiar with critical race theory (CRT) and decolonial studies. These chapters provide a strong foundation for the rest of the book, with clear definitions of critical concepts and knowledge of the social and individual benefits of culturally competency, including healthy, holistic relationships and connections with people of different backgrounds.

Containing the bulk of the theoretical discussion, Chapter 4 addresses critical and complex systems thinking. The shift to the macro level of analysis, focusing on the theory and practice of cultural competency in societal structures, is challenging, but well worth any required second or third read-through for any reader determined to grasp the link between the self-other *and* systems levels. The crux of the authors' argument – that a lifelong journey of cultural competency not only enhances the lives of others around us, but also enhances our own lives by making us more joyful in how we engage with others and understand our environments – emerges in the final chapter.

One particular strength of *Culturally Competent Engagement* is the inclusion of real-life exercises to practice, including activities such as meditations, personal reflections, and list making. This is beneficial for readers who want to treat the book like a workbook, spacing out reading, engagement, and reflection over time. For example, one exercise (Chapter 3) encourages the generation of love and kindness for the self and others, and involves meditation, centering thoughts on a specific individual, and wishing thoughts such as *may your suffering subside, may you be well, may you experience deep and lasting peace, and may you experience great joy*.

Yet, while well-intentioned, these exercises may not be for everyone. Readers with a textbook mentality, or those who are seeking out theory, may

not find the book's emphasis on mediation and reflection well suited for their needs. Alternatively, some activities may be difficult for individuals to complete alone. For some readers, the prompt to think about specific individuals with whom they have conflict relationships may be a potential trigger, while others may feel the amount of space dedicated to exercises such as such as this detracts from the incorporation of theory in an already short book (92 pages).

As critical race theory (CRT) emphasizes, the current realities of individuals can be understood as a web of interconnected causes and conditions that stem from the past (Patton, 2016). An acknowledgement of this legacy-based framework is critical for educators and researchers to understand the structural components of racism. While the authors of *Culturally Competent Engagement* challenge ethnocentrism, in some sections of the book they might have more deeply engaged with CRT frameworks and theory. For example, Chapter 4 presents the case of expansive homelessness in the Pacific Northwest and Seattle, stating that homelessness has multiple roots and is the result of systemic issues. While the authors do credit systemic issues as being major contributors to individual homelessness, they do not provide an explanation or discussion of what these roots are how issues, nor do they provide examples or a reflection on these underlying, systemic contributors.

While reading through this book, I repeatedly thought back to my own higher education departmental service positions, working with colleagues to develop course curricula and departmental programming for a broad ethnic and cultural body of undergraduates. Many discussions focused on the systemic barriers students of historically disadvantaged groups faced, and what we as a department could do to support all our students. Far less often, though, did *mindfulness* enter our conversations. Perhaps it felt like too small-scale a change to implement – too micro a focus to be worth our attention. *Culturally Competent Engagement* shifted my perspective, assuring that even individual mindset shifts have value in efforts to implement systemic change.

This volume would be a particularly good read for book groups, university and other educational institution departmental workshops, and other small, focused gatherings where flexibility and full body engagement with the material is possible. Academics and administrators in the social sciences may have an advantage in digesting the systems-level theoretical discussions, though readers from the humanities may particularly value the collaborative nature of the reflections, which are reminiscent of research team member-checks. Early career academics and administrators may be well-served by dedicating a little more time to digesting Chapters 1 and 4, in order to ensure they feel comfortable with the different levels of theory, research, practical application, and case studies. Alternatively, instructors in higher education – particularly in graduate courses teaching a new generation of educational evaluators, administrators, and teachers – could draw from individual reflections and easily incorporate them into curricula and in classroom exercises.

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About the Reviewer

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