SED 525 EN
METHODS OF TEACHING ENGLISH
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TIMES UP!

Review of *Writing on Demand: Best Practices and Strategies*

BRIAN GIBSON


In a culture where immediacy reigns supreme it is no wonder that timed writing has become so prevalent. Summarized, annotated, and abbreviated, words that pervade our life and stifle our writing. Good writing and timed writing do not have to be all together a different affair. Students can be taught that writing, with practice, can come in many shapes and sizes. Students by the secondary level are well versed in times writing responses and when building upon their past experience a teacher can bring success into an area where many students seem to struggle.

In the first chapter of *Writing on Demand* the authors discuss methods of writing on demand and focus primarily on the idea “Thinking Backward.” Having students become accustomed to accepted structures and styles first gets them thinking about the characteristics of what makes good writing good. The students become familiar with the whole of writing rather than beginning with a prompt and a rubric. This idea that good writing instruction can be used to prepare students for a test is something that I rarely see in AP and honors level English courses. All I remember of honors and AP English in high school is practice, practice, practice. Little time was given to actual writing practices as how to dissect a prompt was deemed more time worthy. Thinking backwards helps students become more confident in their writing which in turn helps students become more efficient in their timed writing responses. The authors state in several places in several ways that good writing and writing on demand don’t have to be exclusive from one another.

The next chapter brings different writing processes to the table many of which are common in most composition classrooms. There are a few ideas which bear mentioning however. Cubing is given as a prewriting strategy as well as looping. Cubing involves looking at a topic from several different aspects while looping requires students to explore the various intricacies of their topic and what pitfalls might arise when choosing paths of analysis. The authors also touch upon something that I believe in wholeheartedly, writing is messy and seldom linear.

Chapter three finally delves into the world of prompts. Prompts make or break writers. Even the best, most agile writers can get tripped up by a poorly written or overly wordy prompt. Chapter three gives strategies for breaking down prompts and rewording them make them easier to digest and work with. One of these strategies looks like this:

- Rhetorical Analysis of Prompt
• Prompt
• Central Claim/Topic
• Audience
• Purpose
• Strategies
• Role

This strategy gets students to break down the prompt and teaches them to sort out any difficulties they may come up against. It also helps students sort out important aspects such as audience and purpose which are often overlooked when in a timed writing environment.

Chapter four moves on to assessment and evaluation strategies both peer and teacher oriented. This chapter gives an incredibly useful chart of commonly used assessment terms. A lot of this chapter deals with authentic assessment and peer evaluation leading to better self-evaluation. The chapter also talks about rubrics and making the grading process more visible to the students so they can fix their writing in a more constructive manner. Giving students that visual is essential in getting them to be better overall writers.

As discussed in chapter five, imitation and modeling helps fledgling writers develop their own writing and sense of style. Almost everything we write as students is a form of imitation. This is especially true for students who have yet to find their own voice in their writing. Some of the best read students and people on general are also the most eloquent and well versed writers. Because of the increased familiarity with different styles and the English language, well read students have a definite advantage over students who tend to use books as coasters. Getting students to read is a good way to teach them style and structure and help them discern what aspects of good writing makes it good, something that many students find to be an elusive abstraction.

Chapter six of the book talks about the environment surrounding a timed writing exam. This includes time to write, planning strategies and possible writing aids. Something very important that comes out of this chapter is the idea that student response to the test taking environment can be a valuable tool in helping students understand what is expected of them. How students view the test is also helpful in determining what it is they need to learn in order to better cope with the test, prompt, writing, etc. This chapter also brings up different planning strategies such as charts and lists to help students organize their thoughts as well as develop their thesis before they actually get into the writing itself.
The next chapter has students focusing on their writing at a sentence by sentence level. Students who are taught sentence variety inevitably become better writers as they command more flexibility with their language. Teaching at this level also demystifies writing and makes it more accessible to students. The authors also argue in this chapter that teaching at this level helps all students become better writers as good sentences make good writers. Working on sentences also helps students with their organization and their overall comfort with the structure and subtleties of the English sentence.

Chapter eight has its focus on grading and scoring of writing and how useful it can be to have students not only evaluate each other but also score each other. Giving students the responsibility of scoring their peers gives them a better grasp on how things are scored and what they should focus on in their own writing. This chapter also continues with the explanation of rubric grading practices and how they give students useful information as to what their focus should be when they are writing. Giving students a rubric to follow also helps them remain organized and self-evaluative.

The last chapter of the book discusses strategies for the various academic writing exams including ACT, SAT, AP, State Assessment Exams and in class essay exams. This chapter takes all that was said in the previous chapters and applies it to different exams and testing environments. It is a proof in practice so-to-speak and gives a lot of information regarding the requirements of the various tests that students have taken or will take at some point in their academic career.

This book is full of so much information it is hard to take it all in. This is a book that earns a permanent place on one’s bookshelf. It brings together two worlds that many people including myself felt were irreconcilable. Because the timed essay test won’t be going anywhere anytime soon this book is a treasure. It is dry in parts and hard to get through but it is so full of information that it is hard to hold a bad light to it. The book has many mini-lessons and writing strategies to accommodate students of varying levels and abilities. Those of you out there who, like me, are looking to bring good, solid writing back into the classroom without taking time away from best practice instruction then this book delivers. In my academic life I have taken many writing classes and at no time was the connection between writing on demand and standard essay writing ever made. Both ventures where treated as separate enterprises where preparation for one was different than that of the other. This book enlightened me in a time where very few things seem surprising or innovative.
Teaching Gooder: Help from the Authors of Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys

Stephanie Ann Foster


The desperate cry of every English teacher echoes through the crags of academia: “How, how, how can I interest boys in reading?” Two researchers, Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, armed with their extensive teaching experience in the high school English classroom, have joined forces to find us an answer. Both have also taught and led research projects at the university level. Both are currently employed by the NCTE, and most importantly, both care passionately about influencing literacy growth in the lives of young men. Published by Heinemann in 2002, Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys (which takes its title from the words of Chicano poet Jimmy Santiago Baca), is their combined attempt to inform classroom teachers about what really goes on in the minds of emerging male readers.

Their approach is unique in that Smith and Wilhelm resist the attempt to forcefully synthesize their findings for the reader; rather than provide a summary of their research, they share excerpts from numerous telling interviews with boys who also supplied long-term reading logs for the study. The interviews are recorded faithfully in the final product, with no attempt to improve grammar or content, and because of that many sections of the book resonate with an engaging authenticity, as when one young man states, “Who wants to read about ancient history, you know? I can’t relate to it, so what’s the point of reading the story?” This emphasis on real individual boys, rather than on all boys prevents the generalization which has so often plagued the study of male learners, and supplies some much sought after voices to the silent mass of struggling readers in classroom today.

The book opens with an eighteen page overview of several related issues: the history of recorded male underperformance in literacy, the culture of violence in male social constructs, the influence of “habitus”, and the major contributions of theorists like Millard, Bordieu, Willinsky, and McCormick. From there the structure is punctuated with participant profiles at the start of each chapter, and research-derived questions such as, “Where do we start when we plan instruction?” and “Why do we teach?”

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow” is referenced frequently throughout the course of the study, and provides the departure point for several of the authors’ suggestions. Chiefly a psychologist, Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as: “joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life”. In the interest of recording the students’ life-embracing flow experiences, Smith and Wilhelm asked the participants to rank several activities (including listening to music, playing video games, and going to school) on a scale of one to fourteen in terms of which ones they enjoyed most. This ranking then formed the basis for informed follow-up interviews. The surveys indicated (not surprisingly) that students preferred those activities which afforded them a feeling of competency. Most of these competencies took shape outside the classroom. It goes to reason, Smith and Wilhelm posit, that if boys are successful outside of school, they may have what it takes to be successful in school: the school context might be to blame.
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Not content with assigning blame, the authors next turn to finding the necessary context changes which would allow male readers to experience the desired competency cross-over. Their findings indicate that learners have several needs: the need to feel in control, the need to exercise an appropriate level of skill, and the desire for clear goals and feedback. As instructors who seek to meet these needs Smith suggests that we can look to video games as our models. Games allow total player control within clearly defined parameters. They increase in difficulty as the player progresses- always challenging yet never outside the realm of plausible success. They provide instant feedback and clear, meaningful, missions. In a classroom these characteristics might manifest themselves as provided options among a variety of assignments, work which is explicitly labeled as increasingly difficult, and the supply of clear rubrics with each task.

These learners also require immediate social and physical experiences which allow them to escape from what they believe to be mundane routines. Providing reading material that can be quickly carried over into conversations with peers (such as sports articles, lyrics, and game magazines) is an excellent way to meet this need. So is encouraging group work and conversation. SRIs (Symbolic Story Representations- so labeled to differentiate them from Silent Sustained Reading) are one of the suggestions which can help to bring reading into the physical world. Students are asked to find cut-outs or create their own graphic representations of what they perceive as meaningful in the story as it progresses. Far from being play by play plot markers, these SRIs have yielded impressive results- including discussions on symbolism and expressionism in works of fiction.

Returning to the video game model, Smith cites sequencing as an important pedagogical tool. Research he references found that many highly skilled English teachers did not adequately sequence reading over the course of the school year so that one work seemed to connect to the next one. Because of this the learning transfer was minimal: each book forced the boys to start over again. In contrast he suggests that the activities in one assignment should be deliberately carried over in to the next, and that they should be transparently drawn upon to contribute to a sense of competency in the classroom.

Eager to dispel stereotypes about male adolescents, Wilhelm and his partner point out that most of the young men who participated in the study perceived school not as pointless, but as a necessary stepping stone to the future. Many of them had detailed plans for their lives, though they often found it difficult to connect those plans to what they were asked to do in school. Quoting Csikszentmihalyi again, the authors encourage teachers to hone in on what these boys hope for, and to ask themselves the question, “If literacy is for the sake of the children, how come we so rarely bother to find out what they want to use it for?”. Finding out may provide the key to capturing their interests, and positioning literacy as a powerful tool to further their goals.

Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development plays an important role in the classrooms Smith envisions. Encouraging learners to reach further than they can currently grasp helps to provide the aspect of challenge which was previously discussed, but it also means an added challenge for teachers: students must not be overwhelmed. Nor should they be bored with what they are doing. Modeling strategies which connect difficult literacy to the familiar (such as art projects, debates, and drama) can help to bridge the gap between these two extremes. Students see
something they can do steeped with information they have not yet mastered. Mastering the task assists them with mastering the content. It is important to remember that it is an active and present model that makes development within the zone possible. Teachers cannot possibly hope to accomplish this mentor role if they remain desk-bound in the back of the room.

When modeling is present, why is it that boys feel so incapable of reaching the literacy goals which have been set for them? The research revealed several factors that contributed to impressions of incompetence, including ambiguity of tasks, length of works, style of writing, and unfamiliarity of subject matter. One student expressed his frustration with English by comparing it to math:

“…with math, it’s like numbers and money involved, and you can look at the example and learn how to figure it out… with poetry, you’re reading someone’s poem. You don’t know how they feel. You’re just reading their words, but they can mean something else.”

How can we structure our curriculum to alleviate this sense of frustration? Firstly, as mentioned earlier, tasks must have clearly defined steps, goals, and scores. Secondly, teachers may want to consider allowing their students to read shorter works in greater numbers. For example, instead of reading one play a year, students might be exposed to several one acts. They would then feel more familiar with the dramatic genre, and be better equipped to attain mastery when higher-level works such as *Hamlet* are introduced. Style, third on the list, often poses a considerable roadblock for students who have little to no experience with it. Remember the young man who lamented the study of ancient history? How much more so must such a student loath covering material which is not only perceived as ancient in subject matter, but in tone and vocabulary as well. Smith does not offer us any suggestion with which to overcome the style hurdle, but he does emphasize that the reading which boys do on their own (of which there is a great deal) does not do anything to prepare them for the styles they will encounter in academia. It may be that relating classroom reading to home reading (perhaps through a compare and contrast assignment) is the key. This same tactic applies to bridging the gap between familiar and unfamiliar subject matter, and brings to mind a repeated implication in this study: we must find out what these boys are reading when they choose to read on their own.

Realism played a consistently important role in the materials which the boys chose for themselves. Although several of the boys surveyed were interested in fantasy (which they perceived as real within its own context), Smith goes so far as to state that “every one of the boys in the study” expressed a desire for material which was connected to the “here and now”. For this reason the boys who were interviewed gave up on works like *The Necklace*, and *Pale Horse*, because they simply did not seem relevant. Current educational trends away from literature and towards expository writing support this desire to read what is real. However, the subject matter, even in expository writing units, does not always translate well to these boys’ lives. Works like *Into Thin Air* were more successful. So were examples of literature in which the students experienced genuine concern for the characters.

After a survey in which the students were asked to read several short stories and them discuss and rate them, it was discovered that it was not reading in general which disinterested them-
the students found some texts highly engaging, especially those which involved music or technology. They reportedly loved texts that included real applicable information, but in the form of a story. Textbooks were universally ignored as far as pleasure-reading was concerned. They wanted useful visuals with their stories, and tended to describe their reading in very visual terms. They wanted information (as has previously been mentioned) that could be easily carried out of the classroom and into conversations with friends who did not share that classroom experience. They enjoyed serials and works which allowed them to engage and become familiar over time. They loved multiple perspectives, novelty, edginess, humor, and powerful ideas. All of these are admirable qualities- ones which could easily be incorporated into classroom reading assignments.

Though the book is a bit meandering in structure, and often raises more questions than answers (arguably a good thing), it offers several potential benefits to the professional educator. The chief among these is an examination of the goals we embrace as teachers. Smith asks us to consider difficult questions such as, “Would you rather that your students always did their homework but rarely read for enjoyment, OR that they often read for enjoyment but often did not do their homework?”(1). The book also provides a rare chance to hear real voices from a population which generally supplies a great deal of silence and very little academic return. For anyone who has ever wished for just a glimpse at what the slumped figure in the back row is thinking, this is a golden opportunity. Though the authors would caution against allowing one voice to represent all boys, there are certainly enough examples present in their work to provide a kind a personality overview. The reader is introduced to so many young men, and comes to care for and understand them so much better that it will likely serve as a balm to frustrated teachers everywhere and provide insight into the lives of frustrated boys in every classroom. While the questions continue to echo through those classrooms, Smith and Wilhelm give them new and potentially paradigm-shattering forms.
Agony & Irony: Improving Adolescent Literacy in Black and White

Adam Gaunt


Most any teacher, new or experienced, knows the agony that can accompany failure in the classroom. Sometimes, this failure manifests from an apathetic student or an ill-planned lesson. As a student teacher that is noticeably wet behind the ears, it is already clear to me that the degree of failure is often controlled by the effectiveness of the teacher. Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, veteran instructors, and authors of Improving Adult Literacy: Content Area Strategies at Work, have observed hundreds of classrooms, many filled with failing students and failing teachers. In their years of teaching experience, Fisher and Frey have determined the prime culprit in classroom failure: a lack of adolescent literacy. In the introduction to their book, they make a bold statement- the strategies in this book will improve student reading and writing in and out of the classroom. The chapters that follow chronicle specific activities teachers can employ in their classrooms to lessen failure and its agonizing effects.

The book is broken down into eight chapters, each focusing on a particular strategy, including reading, note taking, vocabulary, and in class discussion. However, the examples that follow are not just vague propositions or based hypothetical situations. No lesson is “based on a real classroom.” Fisher and Frey offer specific examples that they have personally implemented in their classrooms. In addition, each strategy is accompanied sample lesson plans, including rationale for the lesson and the specific content standards that it addresses. Any new teacher could pick up this book, turn to a page, and have a concrete, easily accessible, lesson plan at his or her disposal. Not only that, but the teacher could rest assured knowing that knowledgeable teachers have proven these lessons to be successful. If approached by a skeptic, the teacher would be able to defend their strategy and explain why it works. However, the authors are also aware that no lesson plan is bulletproof; they even present potential pitfalls that a teacher may encounter with each specific lesson. Using strategies offered in this book can take the guess work out of lesson planning. While the lessons still require a competent teacher, failure becomes next to impossible.

As classrooms across the country are becoming more and more diverse, the book includes a chapter on teaching English learners, something that I found very helpful in my classroom. In fact, the lessons in this book provide opportunity for a great deal of different learners, particularly the chapter on graphic organizers. Since purchasing Improving Adolescent Literacy: Content Area Strategies at Work, I have already implemented three of the graphic organizers presented in the book; all have been met with great success. I look forward to incorporating the strategies from this book more and more in my classroom; it will almost certainly never collect dust.

Perhaps the most ironic thing about Fisher and Frey’s masterpiece is that this is the second
edition. Since its first publication, adolescent literacy has continued to drop, even though teachers have access to solutions— in black and white, between the glossy front and back cover. This book should be handed to every teacher when they receive their credential, not only would it save them agonizing hours of struggling to provide literacy-building activities, Fisher and Frey have done the work for them, and their students will benefit as well; they have cracked the code to adolescent literacy, and are willing to share it with everyone. The lessons included in this book are tried and true—they will work. But, this book is not just for English teachers, the problem of adolescent literacy is bigger than that. Any teacher, old or new, has something to learn from this book. The strategies can be carried across curriculums, and, if followed, will improve adolescent literacy.
Universal Truths and Mythmaking in Language and Images:

*The Power of Film* Illuminates the Power of Story Telling

Luke Golden


In today’s world of increasing mass media and technology, how do we teach high school students to appreciate the importance of story? Howard Suber’s book *The Power of Film* is an ideal addition to the curriculum of any classroom that study’s story; this would include: Film studies, Screenwriting, Filmmaking and even any high school English teacher’s curriculum as well. The elements of story are the same in films as they are in novels, plays, short stories or other pieces of literature that are studied in the English classroom. With the changing technology of the times, the younger generation is so much more versed and comfortable with visual media i.e. the Internet, video games, television, movies etc. Today’s English teachers might want to consider turning their students on to literature by using films to introduce them into the concepts of theme, character, plot, foreshadowing, irony and other commonly used literary devices and concepts. Since so many students seem averse to reading, the use of films, a medium they are more accustomed to, could awaken the joy of story and lead these students to discover and delight in the same techniques and devices used in written texts. *The Power of Film* could become the most indispensible text in the modern English teacher’s repertoire.

The layout of this book lends itself to lesson planning and easy reference. The Power of Film is organized in alphabetical order by subject; the subjects range from “Antagonists” and “Expressionism” to “Genre,” “Heroes,” and “Pyrrhic Victories.” The writings on each of these subjects are usually from a page to several pages. The subjects are short, meaningful and ideal for reading aloud in class to give students new ways of looking at film as literature. Each subject is a terse investigation into the nature of an element of cinematic story telling and each provides teaching nuggets full of pithy aphorisms and astute observations on the nature of popular film. Suber compares thematic trends found in some of the most popular and timelessly classic films in history. He uses a short list of films that are universally considered superb and ties the threads together to try to make sense as to why these films have been so popular and have continued to stand the test of time. These films include *Citizen Kane*, *Star Wars*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Casablanca*, *The Godfather* and about fifty other classic films. These short essays sometimes touch on greater truths that give the reader an “a ha!” moment. For example under the subject heading of “Mystery,” Suber suggests that all stories have mystery no matter what their genre is. In order to keep the viewer (or reader) engaged not knowing what happens next is imperative. “A mystery, by definition, requires that we are aware that some powerful knowledge exists that we do not possess.” (267) Some of what Suber says about film feels like mere opinion and not as powerful as other observations and arguments. His take on “Historical Films” felt too simplistic. Suber maintained that the only way a historical film can be effective is if it deals not just with the time it is about but about the time in which it was made. I’d maintain that any story told with compelling characters and a rich narrative can be
Successful. The statement "...as important as the 1960s were to recent American history, few seem to want to revisit it" (95) seems inaccurate and too much of a generalization when taking into account films about Vietnam (Platoon, Full Metal Jacket, Forrest Gump) that have maintained not only their timeless quality but continue to be steadfast fixtures in popular culture. Arguments such as these feel slight and more like broad generalizations, supported only by a few examples not applying to all popular films. However, the useful and meaningful pieces definitely resonate more and the design of the book allows the educator to pick and choose the sections that resonate most deeply with him and truly acknowledge the literary nature of cinematic storytelling.

The subject "Chimera" made one of the strongest points in the text. A chimera, a creature from Greek mythology, is a fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a serpent. It is literally an animal made up of many animals. Suber equates this creature of many parts to successful films like Frankenstein, Alien, and The Fly; each story requires a "monster" that is put together from parts of several different things to create a dramatic premise. (74-75) With this comparison, Suber not only relates contemporary film to classic Greek mythology he also goes on to extend the metaphor further saying a successful film can take elements from other mythic stories, combine them to create something new. A successful movie can be a chimera itself, a story made up of many. This kind of intellectual leap makes for a dynamic teaching moment and an incendiary discussion starter in the classroom.

The Power of Film may not, at first, seem like a typical asset for a high school English teacher. However, since films may be how many students are first exposed to literature—great works of literature often can become great cinema—To Kill a Mockingbird, Wuthering Heights, and The Wizard of Oz. And mediocre literature can even become a great film—The Godfather, The Shawshank Redemption, and Babe. The potency of this tool becomes clear. Viewing film like literature is a powerful strategy an English teacher can use to hook her students into the joys of reading and perhaps expand the horizons of a student who before saw reading as an anathema.
Best Practices: What Does That Mean?

Review of Teaching Best Practice Way: Methods That Matter, K-12

Grace Lee


A well-known actress appeared on the Jay Leno show a couple of years ago and described a mysterious experience with her 7-year-old son and his friend. Close to midnight one Saturday, her son and his young companion announced they were going to “party all night,” then promptly shut the door in her face. The actress looked into the camera and asked, “They’re seven years old. What does that mean?” Too often, beginning teachers are thrown into their classes and urged to create “student-centered classrooms” with “authentic experiences” and “hands-on learning.” Surrounded for the first time by 40 students and a 10-pound instructional guide, many teachers, especially those with emergency credentials, are left alone with the question “What does that mean?” Teaching Best Practice Way: Methods that Matter, K-12, by Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar, offer some insightful answers. Daniels and Bizar outline specific strategies to truly engage students with practices that have succeeded in eliminating the drone of lectures while inviting students to become players, not observers, in their own classrooms.

Daniels and Bizar clearly lay out seven strategies that have proven successful, featuring high use of interactive instruction and extensive collaborative, small-group instruction. Each chapter begins with a descriptive essay describing the method, outlining its history, and defining its main components. Then, teachers from various grade levels, subjects, and regions explain how they have carried out their method and any changes they have made. The authors’ clear language, as well as that of the teachers, is free of academic jargon, and the book’s organization provides a ready resource for teachers, new and veteran. What the educators offer is less a collection of lesson plans (although there are plenty of them in the book) than a new way of approaching teaching. “[W]hat truly accomplished teachers possess is a small repertoire of powerful structures that help them organize subject matter, time, space, materials, students, and themselves to make learning happen” (10). The authors emphasize best practices that include active engagement with the text, strategies to grasp and own knowledge, small-group activities, classroom workshops, authentic experiences, reflective assessments and integrative units.

Perhaps the hardest concept to grasp as a teacher is the reality that most of our own passive experiences as students is a paltry one to draw upon. Especially when faced with a daunting class of 40 faces, teachers, in a fight-or-flight response, may automatically revert to the model they experienced as students. However, the authors emphasize the need for students to truly experience learning with all their senses. “Students, not just teachers, need to express ideas, act on information and knowledge, and construct meaning,” they write. “Passivity isn’t wrong just because it’s boring; it’s wrong because it doesn’t work” (103). In one of the most powerful images of the book, they write, “Learners must do something with information: connect it, draw...
it, weigh it, dance it, manipulate it. They need to grab ideas by the throat and demand they make sense” (104). Suddenly, dancing about architecture takes on new meaning.

But what does a classroom where best practices are thriving look like? To begin with, it means reading thoughtfully and strategically, with tools like journals and sketchbooks. In a chapter particularly valuable for English teachers, the ideas they offer are as simple as giving post-its to students and asking them to mark passages they have questions, comments or reflections about. The chapters are also as detailed as in-depth scripts of students and teachers engaging in strategies such as listing, free-writing, and K-W-L (What Do I Know, What Do I Want to Know, and What Do I Still Need to Learn). Although many teachers may have learned about this resource, reading an in-depth script of one carried out by a master teacher is an enlightening experience.

Another best practice is representing-to-learn (and the authors are kind enough to apologize for the “slightly artificial-sounding name”). Daniels and Bizar emphasize the value in having students jott down not only words, but to draw, sketch, map, dramatize and sing as well. Again, the strategies range from the simple to the exceptionally ambitious. One strategy is something a teacher could try during the earliest weeks in the classroom: “When you divide a journal page into two columns, or array ideas in two overlapping circles, or begin to draw arrows between concepts, you are using spatial and artistic, as well as linguistic, strategies to help you think” (79). Among the more ambitious projects is a two-minute video that invites students to create their own mini-documentaries on what they are learning. Even to technophobes, new user-friendly technology is making such projects easier and easier and within the grasp of all teachers.

Particularly engaging is an in-depth description of a small-group activity within a kindergarten classroom on explaining the eclipse. The reflections that come out of the group work is startling and sophisticated. Another teacher describes the literature circles among his third graders. The variety of strategies and projects gives a new teacher ideas to aspire to with more classroom experience. Admittedly, some of the lesson plans seem unrealistic in today’s climate of standardized testing. One project on a student graph was a five-week project. It’s hard to imagine spending so much time on such a unit, given how much students have to learn for standardized tests.

Daniels and Bizar offer equally in-depth descriptions of classroom workshops for investigation and inquiry, especially for grade-school children. The reflections that come from some of the poetry workshops are inspiring. For math teachers, the chapter on authentic experiences gives a vivid portrayal of a home-makeover project. All teachers will benefit from devoting some time to the section of reflective assessments, which include portfolios, conferences, anecdotal records, rubrics, and many others. The book offers many examples of students’ authentic assessments that can be used for all subjects.

Teaching Best Practice Way: Methods that Matter, K-12 is a valuable resource for any teacher who would like to see concrete examples on making the leap to experiential learning. The strategies are valuable to new and veteran teachers. It’s a book to be read with a stack of note cards to jot down great project ideas as well as teaching philosophies that can be carried into the classroom.
The Holy Grail of Differentiation: Gifted Means They Can’t Teach Themselves

*Ready, Willing, and Able: Teaching English to Gifted, Talented, and Exceptionally Conscientious Adolescents*

ANN SAYURI KUGE


The glint of a dim fluorescent light reflects off the glossy black cover of a book that lies haphazardly atop a pile of texts I could care less about reading. The sheen is alluring enough to force an unwilling hand to grab at the binding for closer inspection. The words, *Ready, Willing, and Able* shift into focus as I raise the book like a chalice to my eyes. Angelic voices float down through the barely visible dust fibers that follow the ray of soft light to illuminate the heavenly blue text of the cover, which beckons me to open it…

How often do teachers recognize gifted students in their general high school classrooms and designate the few capable students as teacher aides instead of trying to challenge them to learn? Sadly, the answer is far too frequently. Gifted students cannot teach themselves, but this impossible feat is exactly what most teachers expect from them. Dagny Bloland’s *Ready, Willing, and Able: Teaching English to Gifted, Talented, and Exceptionally Conscientious Adolescents* breaks down the all so familiar myth that gifted students do not need instruction. With thirty-eight years of teaching secondary English in the Chicago Public Schools in addition to moonlighting as a part-time college instructor in secondary education, she is definitely no stranger to the classroom. In fact, Bloland believes the classroom is the hub of learning and literacy, and with it are the fringe benefits of challenge, fun, creativity, and beauty wrapped up in every student who quietly waltzes to the tune of her instruction.

Though Bloland herself has not always been an advanced placement teacher, her book gives hope to those who have been mulling about anxiously on the topic of providing differentiated instruction to “gifted” students. Contained within 208 pages is the reassurance that these teachers need not worry any further. Bloland’s first and only book, *Ready, Willing, and Able: Teaching English to Gifted, Talented, and Exceptionally Conscientious Adolescents* is a splendid amalgam of heartwarming, thought provoking, and pragmatic advice for both novice and seasoned teachers alike. Written in a pure and honest voice, *Ready, Willing, and Able*’s 10 chapters evoke the ever so important process of scaffolding through simple, proven, and engaging tools that all converge at the apex of student learning.

*Ready, Willing, and Able* begins in an unfamiliar, yet happily welcomed manner. Bloland, as great teachers often do, devotes the first chapter to sharing with readers who she is and what she does. Not only is this a vital tool in truly communicating with a classroom of students, but it also serves as
an enticing glimpse to the delectable chapters to come. I have always found it irritating when a writer asks me to take a swan dive into an empty pool of dreary facts before he has earned my trust and willingness to hold his hand with my eyes closed. Bloland is clearly of a different breed as she gently strokes the hands of her readers through an earnest introspection. Before moving on to the nitty-gritty of reaching out to the marginalized gifted students, Bloland stresses the importance of her values as a teacher, which consists of “first things” and “questions.”

The three first things: 1. The student first 2. Learning first 3. The classroom first.

The two questions: 1. Who is this student? 2. How can I help this student learn? (6).

Though today’s era of classroom instruction and learning could easily be named “hard times,” it becomes obvious within the first ten pages that Bloland is not of the draconian species of teachers who tend to run their classrooms with more rigidity than Gradgrind could have ever imagined. She understands and conveys the individuality of her students with a teaching approach antithetical to the all too familiar tune of one-size-fits-all. One of Bloland’s favorite sayings that runs as a recurring motif throughout her book is, “Ninety Percent of everything is arranging conditions” (8). Her notion of “arranging conditions” is centered with the students' voices instead of her own.

In Chapter 2, Bloland identifies the wide variety of her “gifted” students who are typically grouped in the following classes: honors, accelerated, college prep, International Baccalaureate, and advanced placement (13). These students are then further dissected and categorized under three categories of “giftedness”:


The three categories form the top of a long detailed list of characteristics in chart format, which is the first of many visual aids found in the book. At the end of the chapter, Bloland lists additional resources on GTEC students along with a four and a half page reproduction of a thoroughly engaging speech by Stephanie S. Tolan on the highly gifted, which compares gifted students to cheetahs in a zoo.

Tantamount to knowing who the GTEC students are and the qualities that designate them as “gifted,” is getting acquainted with their parents. Though short, chapter 3 is crucial to learning how to form positive relationships with parents of “gifted” students. Bloland suggests that teachers should not believe terrible rumors about the so-called nagging parents of GTEC students, and urges teachers to view parents as their greatest allies in providing the best possible education for their children.

Once artfully setting the stage for the key players: students, parents, and the teacher, she then moves on to building a crucial foundation for the students’ success. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the importance of literacy through independent reading choices and reading assigned canonical books. These two chapters are heavily saturated with useful and reproducible tools such as: a metacognition letter, sample reading response log, sample page from an individual conference, reading folder rubric, book lists, and a lesson plan on comparing two texts- Ray Bradbury’s
Dandelion Wine and Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street. In addition, Bloland includes adaptations for regular-level classes at the end of each chapter to make the lessons and activities applicable to all levels of learners.

After reading instruction must come writing instruction, and Bloland does not miss a beat in Chapter 6 entitled, “Coaching Writing in the Zone of Proximal Development.” Those of us who are fans of Vygotsky’s social constructivist principles will especially find this chapter useful and engaging. She illustrates James Britton’s continuum of writing forms as a visual range of varieties in writing with the words, “transactional” and “imaginative” at opposite endpoints of a line and “expressive” dead in the center. Bloland believes that expressive writing must come before the other two forms because it is only in expressive where the student will find his/her true voice. Keeping in step with the previous chapters, this one is not lacking in applicable tools: revision questions, a list of books on writing, a graphic for writer-based prose versus reader-based prose, a literary analysis graphic organizer, and a literary analysis checklist for peer reader are all ready to be used at the reader’s disposal.

What comes after reading and writing? The subject of chapter 7 is usually discouraged in most classrooms, but Bloland sees it as one of the most important tools a teacher can impart on her students, speaking skills. Large and small group discussions are essential to learning, but most often it is the teacher who does all the talking in a classroom. This very thing is what Bloland tries to avoid. She uses the well-known saying, “How can I know what I mean until I hear what I say?” to illustrate the necessity for students to talk in her class.

Grammar is the next stop in Ready, Willing, and Able, because Bloland knows that her students must learn how a language works in order to understand it better. Though the first half of chapter 8 includes my personal not-so-favorite activity of sentence diagramming, Bloland writes the techniques in the form of a soft, chewable tablet that is surprisingly pleasant in taste and easy to swallow. She includes an activity on diagramming famous quotes from Winston Churchill, which also function as interesting, historical tidbits that students enjoy learning about. It seems that Bloland has mastered the technique of “arranging conditions” in a manner that provides the well-needed nourishment of learning while maintaining the delicate balance of keeping it fun. A fabulous linguistics project graces the last half of the chapter complete with the project instructions and a grading rubric. I dare any teacher or reader to say that it is a useless project. Bloland argues that language is inextricably tied to our individual cultures, which makes it a perfect place to disseminate common stereotypes that have become widely and blindly accepted by our students.

The not-so-easy task of student self-assessment and grading is tackled in Chapter 9 with various self-assessment forms used for monitoring changes throughout each quarter in a school year. In regards to grading, the chapter ends with a description of “giver” versus “receiver” teachers. Bloland asserts her stance against the idea of an omniscient presence at the front of the classroom in saying, “It can really threaten a teacher’s identity to teach the gifted—but only as long as the teacher defines his role as knowing all the answers” (159). She then continues to elaborate on the necessity of teachers as “receivers” when she says, “Receiver teachers focus their energies on their students and how they are learning. They spend time observing and
gathering information about how their students read, write, speak, and listen—and then they use that information, combined with their own professional reading, for instructional planning” (159).

If there was any question left as to whether Bloland was an advocate for either student-centered or teacher-centered learning, I believe that statement answers it clearly.

The final chapter, “Joy and Other Core Convictions,” mirrors her first chapter as it once again outlines and restates her values as a student-centered teacher. Bloland paints the picture of what it means to be an effective teacher in such an effortless way that it feels as if throughout the entire book she is speaking to a very close friend and colleague. She fills the last few pages with hope, which she beautifully captures in a simile, “Class time is like a piece of clay my students and I shape together. Sometimes the result is beautiful. Sometimes it isn’t. But for all but one day of the year we have tomorrow to work on it again” (163). What comforting advice for any teacher who believes she has failed her class on any given day when she looks upon the sea of faces only to receive the confusion trapped within eighty glazed eyes. Not to worry, there is still tomorrow. She ends her thoughtful suggestions with humility and grace,

It goes without saying that I don’t have the kind of expertise and giftedness in any field, [but] what I have are experience on the planet and specific knowledge of content and teaching craft, and those qualities are mine to put at the disposal of students. Then sometimes I have to get out of their way—and do so joyfully, celebrating their gifts (164).

Ready, Willing, and Able is a thorough compendium of useful information, assignments, and activities for any secondary English teacher. I doubt Bloland would disagree that students in remedial and general classes would benefit from the strategies and methods in this book just as much as the gifted ones. There are too many remedial and general English education classrooms across the country where students wait patiently for something to learn, but instead they are taught out of scripted books, and scripted teachers and lessons are not the ones who incite learning. These students will not wait forever for the interesting bit of information that will inspire them to want to learn. They need to be challenged in the way Bloland challenges her advanced classes. In my humble opinion, this book may be the first step in finding a real solution to America’s achievement gap crisis. For this reason, I shall consider it to be the Holy Grail of instructional manuals for English teachers, and I strongly urge anyone who is interested in the betterment of education to allow Ms. Bloland’s words to trickle down your throat like an elixir of learning in the parched populace of destitution.
Tools, Tips and Techniques to Salvation

Review of Reading Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques

Melody Elizabeth Pellegrin


Any teacher knows the importance of having a variety of teaching tools. Having taught for a little over a year now I can recall many times when I was about to begin a new unit, be it on a short story, a poem, a play, or a novel and I found myself asking the dreaded and hopeless question, “What do I do with my students?” I would be on the brink of frustration, as I understood that I needed to get my students reading. I needed to intrigue them. I needed to engage them. Yet, that question always lingered over my head as I could not answer it. During my first year of teaching I jumped directly into literature without giving my students a chance to anticipate or connect with the text before reading. We then plowed through the literature, and often times my lesson ended abruptly without any closure. I knew my lessons needed more substance, yet I lacked the resources. As I continued to teach I collaborated with my fellow English teachers, and I started to gather reading strategies to make my lessons more engaging. Now, in my second year I find I still need reminders, tips and ideas to add to my growing tool box and Jim Burke’s book Reading Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques provides just the thing.

Jim Burke’s book has practical advice about reading in the secondary schools. Being a full-time teacher himself, his goal is to help busy teachers remember why they read and provide techniques and help engage students to help make them effective readers. As stated in the Introduction, Burke’s mantra is "Write the book you wish you had" and as an English teacher who has fought through my first year of teaching English, I can say he wrote a book I wish I had read sooner. He has collected one hundred reminders of tips, techniques, and tools to help teachers successfully teach in their classrooms. It is an easy read and serves as a reference book that provides immediate salvation.

Each reminder is brief, an average of two pages which are written with a rational; a quick explanation of why the specified activity is important. The rational is based on Burke’s own experience and on research. Additionally, many of the reminders include examples as used by Burke’s sophomore English students. This gives the reminders vitality because it exemplifies their effectiveness; it proves that they do work and students can become involved and engaged in the reading and produce evidence of their knowledge. As well as the student samples, the appendix contains forty three appendices which can be copied directly from the book, or they can be used as a reference from which teachers can draw ideas, alter, and reinvent to fit their appropriate needs.

Burke acknowledges that many of the strategies and practices summarized will be familiar to teachers. He presumes that knowledgeable teachers will browse through the collection and find the practices that fit their needs. The space for marginal notes on each reminder suggests that teachers will adapt the strategies to fit their own teaching, given their texts and the needs and interests of their students.
Burke opens the book with the importance of creating a classroom community of readers, so it is fitting that reading reminder 1 is "Use Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)." Making space in the day for engaged reading in books of students' choice is an excellent place to start. Burke acknowledges that teachers will have to consider available time and the demands of their course in deciding how much time they will devote to SSR, but he reminds them of its effectiveness in building students' reading capacity.

One section in the second part of the book, "What Students Must Be Able to Do," is "Use Various Strategies." I like the reminder that reading strategies ultimately belong to students; the goal is to help them develop and control a range of reading processes. In this section appear reading reminders 54 through 74, including, for example, "Reciprocal Questioning (ReQuest)," "Survey Question Read-Recite-Review (SQ3R)," "Think-Alouds," and "Reciprocal Teaching." Burke is careful to note in the introduction to this section that reading strategies are more or less effective, depending on the student's need, the demands of the text, and the task involved. What is important is that students learn a variety of strategies in authentic reading experiences. In addition, they need ample opportunities to reflect on their own reading in order to determine which strategies work best for them and when. The goal of the teacher is to gradually recede from the picture, to shift responsibility and capability for monitoring and improving reading comprehension to their students.

So, as a teacher who is always thinking about improving my practice, I am glad I had the opportunity to read a book that is so accessible and applicable; a book that was written by a teacher for teachers. I love that if I find myself at a loss of ideas I can grab this book as a resource and apply it to my curriculum, and I have. As a new teacher trying to fill up my box of tools, I certainly hit a gold mine with Jim Burke’s book.
Everything You Need to Know About Teaching Writing (But Are Afraid to Ask)

Review of Writing Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques

David Piorek


Jim Burke’s book, Writing Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques, could also have been titled, Everything You Need to Know About Teaching Writing. In its scope this book is an encyclopedia of best practices for the writing teacher. In its simplicity of format however, it is a manual that should find an easily accessible place in every English teacher’s bookshelf. It is in both these ways that a book like Burke’s is a necessity for English teachers whether they are new to the profession or have been teaching English for years. As a manual this book can be extremely useful to new teachers who are at times just as unsure of what to teach as to how to teach it. As an encyclopedia this book can be a treasure trove to the experienced teacher who feels they need to assess, improve, and possibly alter the way that they are teaching writing. For the seasoned teacher it is, as the title suggests, a reminder of how to successfully teach writing. For the benefit of both of these groups of teachers Burke shares his experience and has drawn from it a book that is rich with research based practices, tested suggestions, and a wealth of examples from his years in the classroom.

To the new and less experienced teacher, Writing Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques may at first appear overwhelming. It is an almost four hundred page book with forty-four “reminders” and an additional twenty-two sections on how to write in specific genres. At first glance the beginning teacher may respond with an exasperated sigh, "I have to know all of this?" With this in mind, Burke’s book should be thought of not as a strict roadmap, but as a rich guidebook to the world of teaching. Although each of Burke’s reminders are of such quality and depth that the entire book can almost be used as a curriculum guide, it would be a daunting task for a first year teacher to use everything that Burke has included in this book in their teaching. As a guidebook however, Burke’s book can serve as a useful resource to point new teachers in the right direction and show them what to do when they get there.

This book is equally important for experienced teachers, who strive to constantly improve their teaching and are willing to invest the effort into helping their students become better writers. Even teachers who feel that they are already using many of the practices laid out in this book may find themselves indebted to the depth of insight that is included in each of the sections. It is safe to say that even the most experienced teacher will often encounter new obstacles that this book can help overcome, and it is precisely as a resource book that this book has been written. As for the teachers who, after years in the classroom, still feel that their writing pedagogy needs help, this book can be life-changing and classroom-saving in its concise ability to outline the elements of the best ways to teach writing.
One of the main reasons *Writing Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques* is so useful is its content and pedagogical philosophy. In this book Burke strives to emphasize the importance of a student-centered classroom in which the objective is to create competent and independent writers. Over a third of this book focuses on the goal of creating a “community of writers” in the classroom. Burke does not stress the teacher’s own knowledge and skill of how to write, but instead focuses on the importance of the teacher’s ability to cultivate an environment where students can build their own knowledge and skills by taking part in the writing process. And Burke strives to show that it is in the process that learning takes place. Burke has based his teaching on the realization of the importance of building writing skills over time, through revision, group work, and the overall writing process. In the Rationale section to his "Use a Writing Process" reminder Burke states, "Good writing is built, not born; it requires time, but not talent" (107). In a way, this entire book can be seen as a blueprint to build scaffolding techniques in which the end result will be an independent writer that is comfortable utilizing the writing process.

Like most books, the content in *Writing Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques* is what gives the greatest value to Burke’s book, but it is only able to do so because of how Burke has formatted this information. The format of this book is designed so that each of the reminders can be found easily and can quickly assist the teacher in need. Burke purposefully gave each of the reminders a simple and concise title, such as "Scaffold Your Writing Instruction," "Consult the Standards," or "Prepare Students to Write," so that even the table of contents can be used as a checklist of reminders. When the reader does go deeper into the text to read each of the reminders they will find each one rich with the answers to the "how, why, when and what" of the sections. Burke has included in each reminder a "Rationale" that explains what the reminder is, why it should be done, and how it should be done. Following this is the "What to do" portion of the reminder that consists of instructions on how to use this technique in the classroom. Drawing from his years of experience, Burke has also included classroom samples for each of the activities in the "Classroom Connection" portion to show teachers what each of the reminders should look like in practice, and gives valuable insight into what to expect from students. The inclusion of each of these elements in every reminder serves to sufficiently answer the questions of readers as well as offering a cornucopia of new and exciting ideas that teachers can immediately implement in their classroom.

All of this is included in the first section of his book, "What Teachers Must Do." The second section of the book however, is titled "What Students Must Do." Subtitled "Write in Many Genres," Burke supplies a comprehensive list of the types of writing that students may be asked to complete. These different genres include topics such as, "Write a Response to Literature," "Write a Narrative," and "Write a Comparative Essay." In this portion of the book Burke goes one by one in a consistent amount of depth into the techniques of teaching these different genres of writing. Each of these includes an "At a Glance" section for each genre that explains, "what each type of writing should typically include and what it should accomplish" (xix). By doing so Burke covers the entire landscape of teaching writing, from the nuts and bolts of getting it done to the specific nuances of multiple writing genres.

Almost all English teachers are developed and competent writers that have assimilated many of the important aspects of the writing process into the ability to use them almost as second nature. Many
times they have forgotten how they even learned to write this well. That is exactly why a book like *Writing Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques* is such a valuable addition to a teacher's library. It serves to remind the accomplished teacher of how they became an independent writer and how to teach these skills to their students. Burke's book is useful for those that desire to see their students become good writers and indispensable to those that desire to see their students become great writers.
Dear Teacher, It’s a Different Day

Review of *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice*

KADDIE RODRIGUEZ


What day is it? As a teacher of reading and writing in a time in which education is continuously becoming more and more standardized, it is crucial that we understand our times and how they must affect our curriculum. Whether you’re the experienced Language Arts teacher or the one who just arrived to this profession, this conversation between education experts is one every teacher, administrator, and policy-maker needs to hear.

It is not news that today we communicate in ways different than a century ago. Our world has woken to e-mail, blog, and hypertext, but has our curriculum done the same? In the introductory chapters of *Adolescent Literature* you will find a snapshot of the students of today, and the challenges in teaching them. Among many other discoveries, you will find your own definition of “literacy” challenged. In the first chapter, Kylene Beers sets the tone for personal reflection by telling us that “…literacy demands have shifted and we do our students a disservice if we fail to teach to these demands” (7). Furthermore, Beers presents us with a principle that guides this work as a whole: “literacy is a set of skills that reflect the needs of the time” (7).

If after reading the first four chapters you begin to feel helplessly outdated as a teacher, in chapters five and six, you will be updated to the now. You will be introduced to the forms of literature available to adolescent readers today (complete with mini-synopsis for some), and the secrets to effective discussion. In chapter five, Robert Probst presents us with the importance of teaching talking as the foundation for effective discussion. Probst says (of talking): “We seldom address it directly; we seldom teach it explicitly; and we almost never assess it. We do expect it, and we do depend on it, but we don’t teach it. …The unfortunate consequence of not teaching talking is that we don’t seem to be good at discourse” (45). Furthermore, Probst provides us with suggested activities to help students have something to say and feel comfortable enough to participate in serious conversation.

In chapters seven through nine, *Adolescent Literacy* addresses the challenges of teaching vocabulary, teaching English Language Learners, and the benefits of informal curriculum-centered correspondence between teachers and students. I found the latter strategy to be brilliant. Writing notes to your students and receiving their feedback has so many great benefits! Harvey Daniels lists the “Top Nineteen Benefits of Teacher-Student Letter Writing” (141): getting to know your students was the highlight for me, simply because it is essential in creating a comfort zone in which students can learn. Correspondence between a teacher and her students facilitates interaction and helps create a relationship. When students are comfortable and know that the teacher cares about them, they are more likely to learn.
In chapters ten through thirteen we are encouraged to do our own assignments, to write, and teach writing through our own writing. In his own words Tom Romano explains that “When teachers of writing write, …they develop insider knowledge. Teachers who write, demonstrate to students someone who loves to think, explore, and communicate through writing” (171). Furthermore, Donald Murray adds what I consider a must-have rule for teaching: that if your own assignments creates a challenge “for you, and you can still write, sharing your drafts, your problems, and your solutions, …you have become a colleague, not an A-U-T-H-O-R-I-T-Y. A lack of authority-surprise!-brings respect” (181). Working beside your students, bringing yourself down from your throne enough to struggle doing the work you expect your students to do, is a must if you expect your teaching to produce any results. Students are people, and people need others to support them in their learning. What a gift to be able to provide it by learning beside them!

It would be impossible to capture the value of this work in a single report. This book is one that must be savored at a careful pace. When you read this book, allow yourself enough time to analyze and reflect on your reading so that you may benefit the most from it. The book is rich with detail, research, examples, essays, and templates to assist you in tackling the challenges a new age has placed before us.

Inarguably however, the best part of this book is that unlike people away from the trenches, it does not point to your sins only to incite shame. This book gives you a much needed sense of direction and confidence to redeem yourself if you have fallen behind or to prevent you from making mistakes you will later regret. This book embraces all that our profession as educators stands for, and lends us a hand in times of need. As you read Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice, listen and speak. Examine your own experiences, contribute your insight to the conversation, and listen. You will discover, as it always happens in discussion, concepts that will make your teaching more effective and rewarding for you and your students alike. As a bonus, you might even surprise some administrators and policy-makers: if they happen to ask, you might even be able to tell them what day it really is.
“Superman Made Me a Reader”

Review of Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom

PETER TOLFREE


“For Brinker International Restaurants, one of the surprises of ESL training was the discovery of professional-level talent already working in the casual-dining giant’s restaurants. “Within our four walls we have college professors, we have engineers, we have many professionals,” Jose Gomez, Director of Diversity, said. “The only disconnect was that they don’t speak English.”

“So when we say we don’t have enough talent in our industry, it’s there. We just have to tap it.”

- Jose Gomez, Director of Diversity at Brinker International Restaurants. “Operators: ESL programs can boost worker confidence/loyalty.” By Peter Romeo.

When Jose Gomez, Director of Diversity at Brinker International Restaurants, described, to reporter Peter Romero, how the company’s non-English speaking workers were benefiting from the company-provided English as a Secondary Language (ESL) classes, he was referring specifically to newly arrived Hispanic workers occupying the company’s lowest paying jobs: kitchen workers, drive-thru attendants, restaurant hosts, waiters, cooks and dish washers (Romeo, 1).

For primary and secondary classroom teachers teaching ESL students in the United States, Gomez’s statement can be a grim reminder of the future that may lie in store for many ESL students unable to master literacy in English. In 2005, A. Olatunji's Harvard Educational Review article, Dropping Out of High School Among Mexican-origin Youths, reported that, among immigrants of Mexican origin alone, only 48.6 percent of persons over age twenty-five complete four years of high school in the U.S., with female students being three and a half times more likely to drop out of high school than males. For these individuals, the low paying service jobs occupied by their non-English speaking parents become the only source of income available. The result is that the net worth of Hispanic families in the U.S. is less than one-tenth of white families (Milner and Milner. 221-222).

Yet Gomez’s statement also reinforces the importance of teaching literacy to all ESL students, including those who received a strong education in their home countries. Teachers with ESL students know that a person from a non-English speaking country, newly arrived in America, can only achieve professional success by learning how to speak, read and write English fluently. This ability will reinforce the individual’s confidence in the skills he already has, which will inspire him to work hard towards learning new skills. This is how an individual can break away from the low-paying restaurant jobs and work towards becoming the engineer or college professor he was in his home country – or the professional he/she dreams of becoming in the U.S. Guiding all students (from all educational backgrounds) towards realizing their full professional potential should therefore be the goal of every teacher of Kindergarten through grade twelve.
The first challenge to this goal is that most teachers find themselves working with a larger class of primary English speaking students in which a smaller number of ESL students (with varying English literacy abilities) have been placed – a “sink or swim” program in which all students learn in regular English classrooms (Milner and Milner, 222). In these classrooms, literacy lessons can not be simplified so that they are easier for the ESL students to understand. Such an approach will instill only limited literacy skills - and thereby limited professional growth potential – to all students, ESL and primary English speakers alike (British Council, BBC, 2008).

This challenge raises two questions. First, how can a teacher design literacy lessons that fulfill the educational needs of both ESL and non-ESL students of a particular grade level? Second, how can a teacher of ESL students design literacy lessons that will both improve English proficiency and nurture the student’s growing self confidence in the abilities he or she may already have?

An answer is offered in Stephen Cary’s refreshing new book, *Going Graphic, Comics at Work in the Multi-lingual Classroom*. With the constructivist-minded teacher of ESL students in mind, Cary, a teacher and second language learner specialist, shares stories from his nearly 30 years of experience in working with K through 12 Spanish-speaking U.S. students. Cary’s stories successfully argue how teaching literacy with comics of all types – cartoons, comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels - can guide ESL students of any background to fully realize their learning potential.

In a book that is filled with captivating prints of student-made and professional comics from all genres, Cary presents his argument in 218 pages organized in four chapters. The first – and most dense - chapter describes the academic theories that support Cary’s arguments on using comics to teach English Literacy. While Cary occasionally resorts to academic terminology when describing the application of particular theories, the chapter manages to condense several theory descriptions and lesson studies into a clear, accessible reading. The density of chapter one feels necessary, because the chapter’s job is twofold. The ESL teacher needs to be convinced through proven fact and theory that comics successfully enhance an ESL student’s English literacy. The theoretical framework detailed in Chapter one also illuminates the 25 communication based individual and group lessons that are described, in scrupulous detail, in Chapter three. This is followed up by Chapter Four’s thorough descriptions of comic reviews and resources available for the ESL teacher to use. The chapters’ combined resources support one of Cary’s central points: determining the meaning conveyed through images and symbols –the features that make comics what they are - can improve an ESL student’s ability to later decipher the meaning conveyed through English sentences (p. 22).

Cary has anticipated the skeptical questions an ESL teacher may have regarding this idea – or the idea of using comics to teach English literacy in general. In response, Chapter two consists of Cary’s detailed answers to all of the skeptical questions he has anticipated to come from an ESL teacher. In a light and personal tone, Cary offers advice regarding the size of the part comics can play in an ESL classroom, how to choose comics with subject matter appropriate in a school setting, the low cost, the vast availability of comics (especially graphic novels) that offer rich texts for longer, prolonged reading, determine a comic’s compatibility with a student’s abilities and how experience with comics in L1 can help students read comics in L2.
Yet the thoroughness of Chapter two does not address the first question that likely comes to an ESL teacher’s mind: why comics? Cary answers that question at the very beginning of Chapter One by declaring that “Superman made me a reader (1).” He quickly explains how, as an elementary school American kid in the 1950s, he had been taught to read by what are still regarded as traditional education tools: basal readers, workbooks, weekly lists of ten vocabulary words and assigned stories that he wasn’t able to emotionally connect with. But on the night when Cary’s magazine distributor Dad first brought home a Superman comic book, “the art, color, movement and raw energy missing from my school reading” immediately hooked him. Cary realized that he didn’t want to be the people he was reading about in school; he wanted to be Superman. This made it easy to care for Superman as he faced enormous challenges in the comic’s story, because Cary knew what it was like to face his own difficult challenges (pp.1 - 2).

Cary’s personal story provides the theme by which he has chosen the research he describes in Chapter One. Citing R. Sylwester’s 1995 book A Celebration of Neurons: An Educator’s Guide to the Human Brain, Cary consistently reminds the ESL teacher that the more emotionally connected students feel to a piece of material, the more concepts and skills students learn (p. 19). This is a central key to understanding how the ESL teacher can use comics to design literacy lesson unit that emotionally engage ESL students.

One such lesson unit was tested on twelve second and third grade L2 learners. All were of Mexican heritage and ranged in English Language proficiency from beginning through intermediate levels. As Cary describes the lesson in Chapter one, he and a small group of teachers told the students one world folktale per week for four weeks. They did so using what Cary called the Contextualized Storytelling Approach (CSA). CSA used objects, visuals, movement, sound effects, speech modification techniques and teacher facilitated story discussion to make the language and content of L2 stories comprehensible. The students’ assignments: to create storyboards (a type of comic strip with panels and sketches that sequence a story’s major scenes and plot turns) of the stories they were told. The students were also to write text that narrated the picture’s action in a boxed-in space below each panel. At the top of the unit, Cary and the teachers modeled the creation of storyboards. They later acted as scribes for some of the students, recording student-dictated text. A little over half of the storyboards were written in English with a little under 5 percent written in English and Spanish. Storyboard sessions lasted from thirty to fifty minutes (p. 34).

The result was that the students, regardless of how much English they knew, were able to use storyboarding to literally show their understanding of the stories they had been told. The students were also able to use the new technique to storyboard news events, biographies and solutions to a school or social problem they had witnessed. The students also used their storyboards as “roadmaps” for orally telling the stories to teachers, parents, siblings and friends. Finally, teachers who had worked as scribes and editors for their students’ written text reported that the storyboarding had provided a meaningful context to work on and improve students’ English syntax and mechanics such as spelling, capitalization and punctuation (pp. 34 – 35).

The study supports Cary’s insistence that comics provide engaging content – that is, content students can emotionally invest in. To this end, Cary wisely qualifies comics as being more than
just humorous. Comics tell stories of drama and tragedy as effectively as they tell stories of comedy. This, along with the humor, heroes, movement, pop culture themes, real-world language and, most importantly, the artwork all make comics engaging to students of all languages. Cary knows this because, throughout his 30 year career, he has seen how ESL students from all over the world have passionately followed particular comics for years. They emphasize with the characters and their struggles. Through this involvement, ESL students have already learned an inherent understanding of storytelling fundamentals before they have set out to acquire a secondary language. The fundamentals include the names and traits of characters, the nature of human and animal relationships and the basic storylines of a character’s objective, obstacle and solution to the problem that must be overcome (19–21). This kind of intellectual engagement stands as an example of Brain Based Teaching – one of three principals Cary cites in Chapter one to support the use of comics in teaching English literacy.

Cary cites Secondary Language Acquisition as another principle that supports the use of comics in teaching English Literacy. Cary states simply that, for ESL and non-ESL students alike, images are the easiest way to convey messages. If a primary language learner sends an image to a secondary language learner, the message in the image is no longer hidden behind the complicated grammar rules that govern a text – rules that can be so difficult for a secondary language learner to understand. Thanks to the image, the ESL student understands the message sent by a primary language user (2–13).

Cary states that if the ESL student were to participate in a learning activity in which he/she would compare the picture he/she understands to an English sentence that conveys the same message as the picture does, the student would begin to assign meaning to the words in the written text. This ability, according to Cary, stands as an example of Stephen Krashen’s concept of the input hypothesis. The hypothesis claims that a person acquires a second language by receiving understandable messages (comprehensible input), and that students get this kind of input when they’re involved in activities using language for genuine communication (12–13).

To illustrate this hypothesis, Cary cites a 203 study conducted by research B. Norton. Norton had learned of a school in Vancouver B.C. where the introduction of Archie comics to the library had led to an enormous spike in library attendance. To determine why this was, Norton interviewed nineteen girls and fifteen boys who had become avid “Archie” readers. Thirteen of the grade 5, 6 and 7 students were second language learners with home languages of Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Swedish, Bengali and Farsi. When Norton gave the students an Archie comic and later asked them “How do readers of Archie comics relate to one another?” she discovered that the students, particularly the girls, had developed their own reading community. They traded their comics, introduced their friends to them, read the comics together and regularly discussed the stories (31–32). At the same time, the students developed L2 oral skills across such language subsystems as phonology, syntax and semantics (24).

The field studies described in Chapter one form a tenet that makes up the final principal Cary sites in describing how comics can support an ESL student’s English literacy: progressive literacy. As Cary puts it, progressive literacy emphasizes the learning of a second language through using language for real communication purposes, a focus on a text’s (or image’s) content over form, and a meaningful,
group engagement in whole stories that are rich with natural language and are personally meaningful. Such a group can contain ESL and non-ESL students alike. As long as a comic’s story engages the group’s students, they will want to listen to, read, talk and write about the interesting aspects of the comics. This relieves the students of the stilted, artificial language of controlled vocabulary stories and of the more traditional teacher grilling that dominates traditional story discussion (Where did the story take place? Who was the main character? What happened first?). Instead, the students can engage in teacher-facilitated “grand conversations,” in which students work together to identify the resonant aspects of the comic’s material. This includes, as Cary puts it, “the full gamut of life’s facts and fancies, adventures and mishaps, terrors and temptations, joys and sorrows. Language form (or accuracy) is addressed directly with mini-lessons, for example on affixes, adjective-noun order, verb form shifts colloquialisms, or the use of quotation marks – but always in the service of content learning” (23–25).

Each of the 25 lessons described in Chapter 3 are designed to facilitate this kind secondary language learning. While each ESL teacher will respond to different lessons, one that stands out is “Panel Detectives,” in which a group of ESL and non-ESL third grade (or higher) students investigate the content of newspaper comic strips. The lesson’s goal is to lead students in reading the comics to determine how they explore social issues. The teacher can choose issues ranging from gender roles, language use, ethnic diversity, stereotyping, ageism and relationship conflicts – issues that will be interesting to the students (107).

First, the groups choose a research question generated by the class in a teacher-led discussion on the said issues. Each group then forms a hypothesis. If the question is “How many comic strips show men doing domestic chores or taking care of kids?,” the group’s hypothesis may be: 15 percent of the strips in four weeks of the New York Times will show men doing domestic chores or taking care of kids. The group then researches the particular comic strips and record the appropriate data, which they later analyze and compose an answer to their chosen question. As an example of the conclusions the multilingual groups can come up with, Cary describes one group of third graders he observed carrying out the lesson in the San Francisco Bay Area. The group’s question was “How many strips in the local paper feature Latino characters?” The group’s answer: “ZERO!” Three of the four kids in the group were of Mexican heritage (108–109).

The continuous citing of these kinds of examples reminds the ESL teacher of a final theme Cary addresses throughout the book. When designing lessons for the ESL student, the ESL teacher needs to remember the impact of emotions on second language acquisition. One reason comics enhance such learning is the fact that they are not traditional paper and pencil lessons directing the ESL student to write out assessments. Students with low English literacy are unable to show the teacher that they understand a concept using English reading or writing, which can lead to substantial frustration and the possible loss of self-esteem (34). When students feel this kind of worry, messages have difficulty getting through to them, whether they are sent through images or text (12). Group members must be chosen carefully to ensure maximum output, and to this end, Cary encourages groups of ESL and non-ESL students. Such collaboration will foster more English proficient students to bond with and aid less English proficient students. Besides the potential of developing friendships, the group communication will guide ESL students negotiate meaning in their exchanges with non-ESL students. They will learn the culturally acceptable and unacceptable
ways of using the English language. They will begin to make sense of their new world through English, learning language while using language with their non-ESL partners to learn (14). Through this approach, the ESL teacher’s questions on designing lesson that address the needs of ESL and non-ESL can be answered. And the ESL students can learn to recognize their talent – and tap it..

Works Cited


The Legend of Zelda vs. Voltaire

Review of *Going with the Flow: How to Engage Boys (and Girls) in their Literacy Learning*

Lauren Bertoni

Smith, Michael and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm. *Going with the Flow, How to Engage Boys (and Girls) in their Literacy Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006
(Paperback $ 24.50) ISBN 0-325-00643-1

Imagine you’re Ryan, a 15-year-old boy, sitting in English class struggling to pay attention. The teacher is reading Voltaire to the class; all you hear is a low, muffled trombone. While your eyes slowly close you wish that you possessed an “All-Night Mask”, which allows the owner to stay awake while wearing it. Link, the main character in the video game *The Legend of Zelda* uses the mask to stay awake through Anju’s Grandmother’s stories, you acquired one of those last night after beating the temple of fire. You’re constantly drifting off into a dream world where you are Link saving the princess. Wouldn’t it be great if your English teacher knew something about video games or, really, anything that’s remotely interesting?

The latest book by Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, *Going with the Flow, How to Engage Boys (and Girls) in Literacy Learning*, is a response to the research they reported in their first book, *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*. Throughout the book, the authors thoughtfully lay out tools and strategies in order to engage uninterested (to use their words) “boys (and girls) in their literacy learning” (Smith and Wilhelm 1). They start the book by describing the research they did and how they want all students to achieve a “flow experience” (1). Their stories illustrate the meaning of a flow experience: the psychological construct coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) that grounded their research. Csikszentmihalyi bases this work on a simple premise, “that more than anything else, men and women seek happiness”, or Hedonism (1). Flow experiences are those in which “people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (2). For example, when Ryan plays *The Legend of Zelda*. Through the use of the information in this book, teachers could develop lesson plans that could help students become readers who would have a flow experience every time they pick up a piece of literature.

Smith and Wilhelm consider how to achieve the characteristics of a flow experience by organizing curriculum conceptually around inquiry questions. They especially focus on how inquiry units provide clear goals and immediate feedback and how they engage students in meaningful learning in the here and now. Also, inquiry units provide foundational concepts that are needed to become an accomplished reader, writer, speaker and listener (55). The authors give specific guidelines when designing an inquiry unit. Teachers should start with a big essential question, then identify a real world (world outside of school) task that involves “meaningful making” or a constructed response to the question. Then plan backwards from the constructed response by figuring out what activities will help students develop conceptual understandings and abilities essential to address the question and create a meaningful response to it (56).

The boys in their study felt that school was totally separate from life: “What we learn in school is
not in service on real-world activity” (56). The boys in their study did not want to play guess what the teacher already knows. They wanted to solve problems, debate, and develop ideas and tools that they could immediately use and share with others. They wanted to be ready to do work in the real world, not just “do school” (57).

Smith and Wilhelm have both had lots of experience with readers on all different levels. They have seen their share of boys who seemed alienated from school. They have also seen those same boys engaged passionately in other activities, which all had a literacy component. Boys who wouldn’t open a schoolbook would have their noses stuck in the sports section of a newspaper, a car magazine or a complex computer instructional manual (3). The boys in their study were very clear about why they chose what they read or watched outside of class and therefore could assess themselves with that material. On the contrary, the boys were uncertain as to why they were required to read and write in school. The authors suggest that teachers should at one point in time “have a day where you just let the students talk about what interests them moist in school” (10). Teachers should then use that material to develop lessons around their student’s specific interests. For instance, the video game The Legend of Zelda takes place in the Middle Ages and can be used in a lesson with King Arthur and The Knights of the Round Table.

Students want to have a sense of competence and control in literacy activities and in their lives. The authors’ explore how teachers can devise instruction that provides students with a sense of control not just in their learning but also in living their lives. As teachers of English, Smith and Wilhelm count on students transferring their knowledge in multiple ways. They want students to “transfer the knowledge they have gained from their personal experience to their understanding of the situations they encounter in texts and they want them to transfer the understanding they’ve gained from reading to the way they live their lives” (25). Teachers cannot assume that this transfer will occur, therefore Smith and Wilhelm offer effective conditions that need to be met in order to insure a successful transfer. For example, students need to have a complete understanding of the knowledge before it can be transferred into real world experiences.

The authors’ explain that before teachers can share their secrets with students they have to be able to name them. Teachers should identify specific kinds of texts and think about the particular demands they place on the reader’s. For example detective stories require a reader to identify clues and recognize red herrings, eliminate suspects and so on. Teachers could also identify a particular strategy or kind of inferencing that puts similar demands on readers, whatever the type of text. For example, regardless of the kind of text being read, understanding symbols requires readers to identify them first (24).

Throughout their book the authors’ give examples of inquiry units and models that can be put to use in any classroom. They give step by step instructions on how to construct an inquiry unit plan that will not only engage the most detached student but will place personal power and responsibility in the students hands. Smith and Wilhelm also stress how important it is to make literacy visible and social. This book is a great tool for teachers who need help getting the Zelda players of the world excited about Voltaire.
But It’s So Simple!

Review of Write Beside Them: Risk, Voice and Clarity in High School Writing

Rachel Bobrosky


In classrooms today writing has been reduced to a glorified way to answer a teacher’s questions. Student essays have become a vehicle to provide knowledge of grammar and sentence structure to answer unimaginative prompts like, “Defend an opinion” or, “explain why the protagonist is dynamic.” The blame for this can’t be saddled with any one person; school boards demanding high-test scores, teachers strained with too many students, students indifferent to the entire writing process, it all accumulates creating a president of teaching mechanics, not writing. It comes as no surprise that many students don’t have any passion for writing, forcing teachers to read an endless stack of unimaginative, poorly written essays.

It is easy to say that how we teach writing needs to change, but actually taking the time to discover how is an arduous task many teachers find beyond their motivation and patients. Lucky for teachers Penny Kittle took on this challenge, using her own experience as a high school writing composition teacher as well as a k-12 literacy coach to help outline the way in, Write Beside Them: Risk, Voice, and Clarity in High School Writing. From the beginning Kittle is clear on the book’s intent; teaching writing to adolescents, but more importantly, “the planning, the thinking, the writing, the journey” any successful teacher must execute to produce successful adolescent writers (2). The tools for each step are provided chapter by chapter by Kittle, each building off of the other creating an easy to follow account of the tools and strategies she uses in her class to motivate students.

Good writing starts with a solid foundation to build off of, and Kittle does not leave the reader wanting. Before discussing the actual execution of her writing class Kittle offers insight into what she believes and why she teaches the way she does. An important point is establishing who Kittle’s students and school are; explaining that while the classes tend to be lacking ethnicity the rural New Hampshire classrooms are diverse in every other way. Kittle’s teaching is centered on a revelation she had one day while teaching, “you can’t really teach writing well unless you [the teacher] write yourself” (7). Kittle stresses that the way to create a great writer is not in evaluating the final product, but in the process of creating. While reading I was surprised both at the simplicity of this statement, as well as how much sense it made. As a teacher if I don’t embrace and enjoy teaching how can I expect my students to?

Kittle begins with an overview of what her class accomplishes in a semester along with several words of warning. I found these tips to be some of the most helpful points in the book. The advice offered was clearly backed up with experience; before issuing, “you will have to make choices” when it comes to deciding what to teach in a single semester is a long list of Kittle’s own decisions made.

Each section of Write Beside Them ends with an example of strategies at work shown through
Kittle’s past students. I loved these ending pieces, the student focus helped to put the ideas of a section into a real life setting, as well as pointing out exactly what steps had been taken to insure the student’s success or exactly where the advice faltered and what could have been done to change the outcome.

Kittle uses each of the following five sections to create how to teach students the writing process. Each section builds off of each other referencing back to skills students have acquired in each of the preceding sections. Kittle begins her class with quickwrites done in the student’s writer’s notebook. The concept of doing freewrites in a journal is certainly not a new concept, but what sparked my interest was in how Kittle explained the contents of a writer’s notebook. The writer’s notebook is the place where a students writing will start, it is to be the place for any and all inspiration. The result is a notebook not just filled with writing prompts to inspire students but pictures, quotes, doodles, even funny observations and to-do lists. This is important, students must feel comfortable to write whatever in these notebooks, “by the time they’re done, they are connected intimately to their notebook” (24). Having the repetition of ungraded quickwrites accomplishes several things: it helps a student loose their inhibitions toward their writing, helps a student find their voice, as well as create a routine. Students know that they will have to write every day so they begin to think about writing everyday. This is what excited me; while the notebooks are an old strategy the routine helps to address a huge problem with students, and a fear of mine as a teacher, a student complaining, “I don’t know what to write.”

While her faith in writer’s notebooks is clear, Kittle stresses throughout the section notebooks are, “rehearsal” writing cannot grow if left in this stage. As teachers we must push students past this “play” writing and develop their ideas. Here is where Kittle introduces the next section: writer’s workshop.

In this step students need to learn how to reread and edit their writing to develop a full idea. This is also where Kittle’s theory of the teacher needing to write with the students comes into play. Kittle explains that to be effective in teaching students writing they need to have two forms to look to, “the study of great products (other writers’ work) and the study of the process- [their teachers)” (73). Kittle made it easy to see how to incorporate this into teaching. Before letting the students loose on their own work, let them loose on theirs. By using your own work as a guide a teacher models to students what they are looking for, how their minds work while editing. Without this students don’t have any idea of how to look at their first drafts, in addition it proves to students that all writing needs to be reworked, even teacher work; students need to keep in mind, “bad writing is essential to uncover good writing” (26).

After students have discovered how to attack their work they need time to change the work. Kittle reassured me as a teacher. Yes it is often very different to hold your tongue and let a student go in direction that may not be best. Yes at times you (as a teacher) will need to sit back and let students (occasionally) just sit and do nothing. As a teacher I find the idea of a student sitting and just sitting, not being directed to a specific task is a little scary. As a writer I know that just sitting and thinking about a piece with no agenda is necessary. Kittle addresses all of this and reassures that all of this is necessary in helping to mold students into great writers.
The third section begins to address the specific forms, genres, of writing that must be taught to students. I was surprised at how late this came in Kittle’s book. As a teacher isn’t this what I am supposed to teach from the beginning? Of course teaching genre is important, but the previous steps are essential in getting a student excited about writing, as well as getting them to a place where they can edit and structure their writing. Kittle starts her students off slowly— with narratives. By starting in an easier, more comfortable genre Kittle can spend more time, “to practice a few essential elements: dialogue, sensory detail, and voice” (104). As shown previously, the only way to get students started in this process is to do it first. Kittle writes a “snapshot” of her life then picks it apart to help create a narrative whittling it down to specific points. The key to this exercise is doing it in front of the students giving them the opportunity to see how to dissect their own work.

Once students have mastered this students can move onto a new model, persuasive. Persuasive essays are nothing new to students, it makes up most of the writing they have done for classes, but rarely do students get to persuade on a topic they actually care about. To help make this writing interesting Kittle makes her student’s persuasive writing, “an opportunity to address the inequities” teens face everyday, and once given the opportunity to explore students flourish in this genre (131). It is easy to see why, “teenagers like to argue more than anyone” in teaching them persuasive writing it is taking that passion they have, slowing it down, and giving it clarity and structure (131). While going through all genres Kittle makes it a point to not just use her own writing as a guide for her students, but other works as well. As a class Kittle and her students break down the writing, looking to see what the authors did to make it work, and what techniques help within that genre.

I was surprised to find that the smallest section in a book about writing was on mechanics and grammar. Shouldn’t the actual writing be the most important? Of course, but it should be integrated into the teaching of writing, it should not be the teaching. I was a little disappointed in Kittle’s answer to how to get students to embrace and remember grammar, repetition. Just a constant reminder of how things are done, it just seems so bland and ineffective, but Kittle goes on to explain that she conditions to think of mechanics differently, “we [as a society] measure the credibility of a writer by the adherence to [the code of grammar]” (191). I was disappointed by how much sense this made. Really the best way to get students to understand why mechanics are important is not to show them how much it improves writing, but how others will perceive their writing. While this section is small, and was slightly disappointing in comparison to the rest of Kittle’s strategies, everything mentioned made sense.

Overall I really enjoyed Kittle’s book and can easily see myself incorporating her strategies into my own teaching. All of her tool for learning are explained and have proof as to why they work. Kittle’s informal writing acts more as an unintimidating book of suggestions on how to teach, than a list of rules on the right and wrong way to teach making it an easy read and incredibly helpful.
Sticking It to the Test

Review of *Getting Started: The Reading Writing Workshop: Grades 4-8*

Roshni Dastur


“Again Ms. Dastur? But I just finished a book!”

Ah, the moans and groans of my seventh grade class assigned to choose a new independent reading book. School has changed so much in my short lifetime. I grew up on the cusp of reading for enjoyment and reading for the standardized test. As I was leaving high school, the standardized test became more prominent as a reading and writing guide than works of literature. Students can quote the same short story given to assess their reading comprehension skills, but are clueless when it comes to C.S Lewis, Judy Blume, and even the once insatiably popular R.L Stine.

Students are being turned off literature, something I had always considered an escape from the drudgeries of life. In *Getting Started* Linda Ellis and Jamie Marsh both focus on the idea of bringing literature and writing back to being fun rather than a chore. They understand the importance of literature to a student. Literature not only helps student comprehension but writing skills as well; “The best writing teachers our students have are the authors of the books they are reading” (138).

*Getting Started* is a great introduction to incorporating reading-writing workshops in the classroom. I believe that some of the structure and activities presented in the book can be used well into high school and is not limited to grades 4-8.

Ellis and Marsh lay out a great plan for any teacher to follow. First it is important to get the students excited about reading. Everything else will follow. Reading aloud in the classroom is one way to get students excited about literature and it is a modeling tool, “We model fluency by demonstrating what a good reader sounds like, and we model the thinking processes good readers go through when they read in order to understand and make connections to texts” (10). Also incorporating teaching comprehension skills throughout is more beneficial than isolating each skill and expecting the students to apply it. Students then learn the skills modeled by the teacher during a read-aloud and can then apply it to their independent reading. For those who are concerned with how students might then fare on the almighty standardized tests, then they should not be alarmed. All comprehension skills that they have then learned along the way are on the test. The material is just presented in a less sterile way.

Writing workshop is another daunting task for both teachers and students. However, Ellis and Marsh give some helpful tips that build on the reading workshop. What is stressed is the importance of showing the students that as teachers we are not preaching a “do as I say, not as I do” attitude. If there is independent reading assigned, Ellis and Marsh encourage teachers to pull out a book and join in. The same goes for the writing workshop. As students are encouraged to
write quick-writes and share, the teacher should pull out a pen and jot down some ideas and be willing to share as well. This emphasizes a safe learning environment where the teacher is not exempt from sharing just because they are the teacher.

All in all the book is a great source for teachers at any level. Everything can not be used at every level, and most things would have to be modified. However, the basic philosophy can be shared with any age group. The book is also a reminder for teachers that we are there to spark the interest and hopefully a lifelong affair with literature and writing; not adhere to the standardized testing script we have been handed to suck the passion of reading and writing out of the classroom.
Smooth Sailing through the Sea of Poetry

Review of Teaching Poetry in High School

Maureen Grandchamp


In her poem on poetry itself, Marianne Moore wrote that poetry is “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” Such a beautiful image she paints, but what does it mean? How do we get our students to understand, or to even attempt to understand what the poet is trying to get across? It is ironic that even in poetry trying to explain what poetry is there is this fear and uncertainty that runs rampant in those unschooled in the ways of teaching this form of writing. Poetry might be one of the most frightening aspects of education for both students and teachers alike when it comes to English classes. The former must struggle with words and structures they have little familiarity with, and the latter must teach how to take this very subjective art form and make it accessible for their students. Impossible? Not quite, but clearly difficult.

It is in this light that Albert B. Somers strung together poems, scenarios, lessons, and guidelines for the teaching of poetry in high school in his appropriately titled Teaching Poetry in High School. He claims that the purpose of his writing is “to encourage future readers of poetry” (ix). In the two hundred or so pages of the text, Somers attempts to give a solid foundation to teachers, like us, who might be unsure of how to break the ice block surrounding poetry. How do we approach poetry in our classroom? How do we encourage our students to participate in active learning with poetry at the center? With his clear organization, Somers sets teachers up to succeed in this, and to hold the answers to these questions in their back pocket. He begins with background on poetry in American schools, moving on to how we, as teachers, might select poetry for our classroom, then to approaches and methods of teaching poetry, and concluding with resources that a future teacher would like to have in their bag of teaching ammunition. He does not only offer techniques, but a wonderful selection of poems that he considers “teachable,” a word he echoes over and over again in his writing.

Somers touches on many topics that a future teacher of English will find helpful, but there are a few sparkling diamonds in his chest full of precious gems. Poetry is not only experienced in reading, but also in writing. It is in this area where Somers excels. He discusses how students can learn of poetry through talk (discussions facilitated by the teacher), performance (poetry jam sessions or interpretive scenes), and in writing (both through essay and the dreaded writing of poetry itself). Even as a future teacher who has studied and tackled the most difficult of poems, I still get the “blank page jitters” when it comes to the actual producing of poetry, and I hope I am not alone in this. Somers has a solution, however, in the form of clippings poems, or poems created by splicing together clippings from magazines and newspapers, where “the raw material […] is so accessible and the act of assembling it so creative” (129). The lack of rules, coupled with the fact that the words of the poem are easily found through other’s writings, practically wipes away the fear associated in this endeavor for students. It shows them, without a doubt, that “writing poetry is expressive” (129).
Another key point to Somers’ text comes in his section on how to choose poetry for a classroom, when he stresses time and time again that teachers “should make every effort to teach only poems they like – really like” (29). This is a golden rule that should stick with teachers throughout their careers, as poetry itself is so personal and expressive. Passion and love for a poem certainly comes across in the teaching of it, and without this key element the job of decoding poetry is made infinite times harder. Despite this stance on enjoyment, Somers also makes allowances for poems which we, as teachers, are lukewarm about – they should be taught, but kept to a minimum if at all possible.

As a parting gift, Somers has included a wealth of resources and helpful items for a teacher to use. There is a selection of anthologies, a list of reference works, available media sources and journals, and a review of different awards given out in the field of poetry. These are great as a quick reference guide for any teacher. Do you need to build up your library of magazines and journals on poetry? Appendix D can point you toward the American Poetry Review. Do you need a video for your classroom to help introduce a unit of poetry during World War II? Appendix C can remind you that there is a short film titled Poetry of World War II floating around out there.

Before you rush out to add this to your bookshelf, however, be advised that there are also some drawbacks to Somers’ text. He is attempting to make poetry contemporary, which is a valiant effort, though in doing so he has paid little attention to the writings of the past. When discussing how to select poems for the classroom, he talks of teaching John Donne’s “Death, Be Not Proud” OR Maxine Kumin’s “Will,” and concludes that it would be advisable to only teach the latter. He seems to have forgotten one important word: and. Why must the choice be made between the two? Why not offer a view of what has come before, and then what is being written now. Making connections for our students is an important tool in teaching something as harrowing as poetry, but we cannot do it at the expense of the past. They are called classics for more than the fact that they are “old, […] and therefore safe” (28). Poems of the past should be set up against contemporary poetry as examples of where these techniques and forms came from, at the very least. Somers, as if sensing the knee jerk reaction of those who might prefer a more traditional canon, attempts to appease by admitting that “Emily Dickinson is a strong choice [for a poetry unit] because her poems are so brief and approachable,” but still he would “pick a contemporary poet” (84). His obvious bias for contemporary poetry sometimes overshadows the more important aspects of his writing, but a discerning reader can take the concepts and apply them to the more traditional selections, if needed.

If you are interested in wonderful ideas on how to facilitate active learning and enjoyment surrounding poetry, with contemporary poets at the helm, then I highly recommend this minnow of a text. It is easily accessible, short, and will help you navigate and sail smoothly through the more difficult points of teaching poetry in your classroom. However, if you’re looking for examples on how to use the old canon, with classics such as Shakespeare’s Sonnets, Milton’s Odes, or Rossetti’s poems, I suggest you jump ship now – unless you are prepared to take the finer points of Somers’ writing (for there are several) and make the modifications yourself. Overall, however, this is a great text for the up and coming teacher to own, for it provides a wonderful resource not only on methods of teaching poetry in the classroom, but of poems themselves. Poems by Gary Soto to Robert Frost are quoted in their entirety, so the new teacher won’t have to search far and
wide for the works Somers cites. It is important that we, as teachers, are able to make poetry enjoyable for our students, to offer them a chance to express themselves, and with Somers' help we will be able to.
Michelle Huitink


Gilmore’s ideas are sure to save the first year teacher! Class discussions can still run cold or students may leave a teacher hanging when asked to respond, but Gilmore provides exercises to help get the teacher out of these sticky situations. Speaking Volumes is dense, but is filled with outlines of teaching strategies and exercises that are ready for classroom use for teaching a text or getting students discussing issues. Gilmore provides many ideas for initiating and motivating students in discussing assigned readings. Some of Gilmore’s ideas are fresh and others have been used in the classroom by many other teachers. Most importantly, Gilmore speaks from experience and shares activities as they occurred in his classroom, some of which had a rough start, but these ideas have worked well when practiced in his own classroom.

Speaking Volumes is meant to be useful and readily accessible. The lists, bullet points and samples from commonly taught texts are to keep the format of these activities practical and ready-to-use for any teacher. All one needs to do is flip open to a chapter of a method one would like to use for teaching a text in the classroom and build a lesson plan around that chapter. The examples given are to engage students, make group work and class discussions fruitful, and show how teachers can seize opportunities for a great classroom discussion. Gilmore, as a teacher himself, understands how hectic teaching can be and helps the teacher by giving strategies that have proven to work in his own classroom. Therefore, to make this book relevant to subjects other than English, Gilmore has provided the “connecting to current events” section of each chapter, so that other courses that deal with “issues that affect the social and political aspects of the world” (5). The exercises presented in Speaking Volumes can be modified in various ways by any teacher to fit one’s topics, class, or purpose of an assignment.

Each chapter is structured in the same way: an introduction, example exercises, Guidelines for use, follow-up ideas, and connecting to current events. The goals and strategies for one’s students vary because students all learn differently. However, there are certain aspects of a discussion that make it good. According to Gilmore, discussions should:

get as many students involved in the process as possible, raise the overall level of critical thinking about a text or topic in a classroom, leave students feeling as though they have discovered ideas and achieved tangible results, prompt students to make personal connections to a text and to language, emphasize that multiple interpretations of a text can coexist, and enhance and support other kinds of instruction and learning. (1)

The main purpose of discussions, as Gilmore states in this quote, are to make sure all the students benefit from the discussion and for the teacher to take a step back by letting students take control of their education so they can hear their own voices and the teacher can listen to the insights students have to share. Starting, controlling, and maintaining class discussions and insuring these discussions are productive can be difficult. Some students are quiet, others hesitant to speak in front of their peers, and some students are not enthused by discussions. As the teacher, one may not have all the correct responses to student questions. The skills of leading a discussion improve with practice.
The central idea of chapters two and three is to arrange the classroom, so students can compare ideas and interact as a group or class. In Chapter Two, Gilmores shows how surveys based on current events can prompt student discussion. Surveys are effective because the statements made should be questioned and are purposefully controversial in order to engage students by challenging their individual opinions. For example, the statement: “It is better to give up being with one’s family for love than to give up love in order to be with one’s family” (7) can be discussed when teaching Romeo and Juliet by implementing examples from the text. Students can also use the text to support their views, which gets students to return to the text, students learn to do research, and citing the text for evidence. Connecting themes from a text to actual events makes literature relevant for students. Surveys can be altered to create writing prompts or essay topics.

In Chapter Three, when desks are arranged in a circle in the classroom, the teacher becomes part of the discussion and students can feel in charge. For example, with the “Fishbowl” activity, the teacher sits in a circle with the students, which rids the teacher of their authority. Instead, the teacher can step back and let students control the discussion. The “Fishbowl” works well for quiet or hesitant students because rules for the “Fishbowl” gives everyone a chance to speak without interruption and allows talkative peers and the teacher to remain silent in order to hear everyone else out.

Chapters four and five provide methods using different media, such as computers or poster paper. Students find writing with magic markers exciting when writing on big paper. Using technology in the classroom also varies the lesson and can make an assignment more accessible or fun for students. These activities increase participation and students can take the work more seriously (36) because the exercises require the participation of each student in the group. For example, in the “Silent Discussion” activity has students write. Students learn that writing is a form of communication. By writing, students are required to focus and concentrate more.

Chapter six gives an overview of debates as a different form of discussion. Discussion promotes thinking from all sides of an issue, whereas a debate tries to prove that one side’s idea is right and the other is wrong. Debates are not as effective for discussions because students will focus on whether their side is winning or losing.

The strategies Gilmore recommends in Speaking Volumes work because he has a great understanding of teachers and students alike. Some activities may have been borrowed from other teachers or were used without any specific planning, but the outcome of getting students talking about a text was effective. Even if students may not be particularly enthusiastic about an issue or a discussion did not go the way the teacher intended, as long as these strategies are attempted in the classroom, students will be involved and learn from the discussion.
Why Do We Have To Read This Book?

Review of *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts, 4-12*

Victoria DeSantis McDonell


“Why do we have to read this book?” is a question Kelly Gallagher says he hears at the start of all novels in his classroom (148). As a student, I remember thinking and saying the same exact sentence to my teachers. Now, after reading Mr. Gallagher’s book, the answer is clear to me. According to Gallagher, students should read for 10 important reasons. Two reasons that stand out are: 1) “Reading opens the door to college and beyond,” and “Reading prepares you for the world of work” (149). Kelly Gallagher’s book is filled with excellent strategies for student comprehension. He also includes key points to understanding: activating prior knowledge, first “draft” reading, inference and deepening comprehension through a second reading, and the importance of group collaboration.

Gallagher’s book appeals to both elementary and secondary teachers. Gallagher quotes David Sousa, who compares learning to nurturing a palm tree. Sousa states, “much like a tree growing new branches, everything we remember becomes another set of branches to which memories can be attached. The more we learn and retain, the more we can learn and retain” (34). This idea resonates with me as a teacher. The skills teachers impart on their students will optimistically be transferred through grades and built upon with other more complex learning strategies.

*Deeper Reading* discusses the need for building background knowledge prior to the first read of a piece of literature. By giving students scaffolding (information on the text prior to reading) the teacher will be facilitating more potential for deeper comprehension. Gallagher offers many “framing activities” (38) to use prior to reading a new piece of literature. One example the book gives is doing a web search. Gallagher gives students the term “Big Brother” from George Orwell’s novel, *1984*, to Google and come up with appropriate results. He also has the student’s research the term in different genres: books, newspapers, music, poetry, etc. By using this activity prior to reading *1984*, the students become more familiar and exposed to potential themes or terms vital to the novel. This in turn, will help the students deepen their comprehension.

Gallagher addresses the challenges of a first “draft” reading (153). The book offers an analogy of the first reading of a novel to the “down” draft. This is where the students become somewhat familiar with plots, characters, language and the tone of the novel. The second reading is called the “up” draft, which I will discuss later in more detail. The book then discusses four questions for a teacher to consider when starting a new piece of literature: 1) Have I provided my students with a reading focus (54)? 2) Are my students willing and able to embrace any confusion (62)? 3) Can my students monitor their own comprehension (63)? 4) Do my students know any fix-it strategies to assist them when their comprehension begins to falter (71)? Each question is addressed in detail, as well as strategies to enable teachers to answer “yes” to all of the above questions.
Next, the book accentuates the need for a second “draft” reading, which Gallagher refers to as the “up” draft (80). During this second reading, Sheridan Blau suggests the importance of teaching inference, or reading between the lines. With this, he asks the questions 1) What does it say? 2) What does it mean? 3) What does it matter (86-90)? The author hopes for teachers to get students from the “what does it say” part (literal) to a higher-level interaction with the text – the “what does it mean” part. Finally, getting students to understand why they read the story, the “what does it matter” part. Similarly the book offers many strategies for teachers to ensure students get to the – “what does it matter?”

Deeper comprehension may also be realized more thoroughly through group collaboration. The book states, “...There is not a single book on Earth that is completely understood by any one person” (104). This encourages the point that when you are able to discuss things like books, poetry, movies, etc., with other people you ideally will come away with a different perspective and more thorough understanding. A point the author makes when doing group collaboration, is to avoid “hitchhikers (106)”. Gallagher reinforces this idea by assigning students a task during group collaboration, thus avoiding the group hitchhiker. One strategy discussed in the book is the “appointment clock.” In order to avoid students always working with a buddy or the same person every time, the students have a clock with other classmate’s names on the hours (107). The teacher calls out a time e.g., 2 o’clock. The students look at their clocks and find the student’s name that corresponds to that time. This strategy would work well in both elementary and secondary school levels.

Kelly Gallagher’s book is filled with excellent anecdotal stories. In one engaging tale, Gallagher compares baseball to comprehension. He says, just because you understand baseball: a hit, runs, pop flies, doesn’t mean you understand the deeper meaning of it. Similarly, reading the words on a page doesn’t mean or guarantee you have understood what you’ve read. And as a teacher, one should never assume that students will comprehend all of the words on a page. Having said that, Gallagher gives an excellent strategy for students to use when reading an unfamiliar pieces of literary work. Students are given a bookmark to use during reading. Students are asked to jot down any words, or passages they don’t fully comprehend (115). The students then bring their bookmarks and work through them with a group. This reinforces student’s ability to take charge of his or her own comprehension. This also allows for group collaboration and students helping each other obtain a deeper comprehension, something all teachers want students to achieve.

This book would be an excellent choice for teachers who have students that struggle with comprehension. Gallagher offers various ways to get students engaged in reading beyond the standard curriculum and classics. By giving students optional reading materials, other than the classics/standard curriculum, teachers can encourage more reading. And as we know, with more reading comes deeper comprehension.
It's Okay To Serve Omelets . . . Maybe

Review of Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers

James Oh


In Secondary Education, teachers are caught in a bind where they must be able to grab the interests of their students without watering down the curriculum to simply cater to the tastes of their audience. It is a difficult proposition to be in, especially in a society that is truly unique compared to the rest of the world, where such a large degree of issues must be accounted for. As an educator, especially in the subject of English, there is an ambiguity that must be dealt with when delivering the content, so as it will be clear in its purpose and objective. To cover a wide variety of skills, and to expand the breadth of knowledge and understanding of the content, English teachers must be able to approach their subject from different angles. Tom Romano attempts to provide a tool that teachers can utilize in their classrooms that would allow for flexibility and creativity, but I found the message to be somewhat lost, as it attempts to make use of the very strategies it is trying to champion as the way to teach this inherently complicated subject.

In Blending Genre, Altering Style, Tom Romano proposes a method he sees as a way to expand the content of English in a way that is more organic in allowing the students to stretch creatively in their approach. As the title suggests, the blending of various genres within the very broad umbrella that is English is a means to hit various cognitive and personal interests a student might have. However, I was lost when first reading the book because it makes assumptions that all teachers would have experience in the various scenarios he proposes. Romano states that it was an approach that was developed with students in mind, but he references those experiences to a previous book (Writing with Passion) he wrote, not clearly stating why it would be a benefit in this book, but merely claiming it as fact. As such, I quickly realized that this particular text’s purpose was to provide in-depth details and examples of what he calls multigenre writing; I just wish it explained why I’m looking at them in the first place.

In the introduction, he provides us with an anecdote of a research he was conducting on elementary students and how they approached writing. He was stunned to find that his admittedly smug attitude, “where reader response was for charlatans and literary texts had particular meanings that students couldn’t possibly know” (x) was completely erased after a month of interacting with the students. Only problem is, he never explains what the research was for, only saying it somehow contributed in writing this book. What Romano does not lack in explanation is somewhat forgiven in providing many examples of multigenre writing projects, but he provides the information in a non-linear fashion with the purpose being ambiguous, leaving this reader confused regarding the content that is being presented.

In Chapter 2, Romano provides an example of the multigenre approach written by a student in a master’s program at Utah State University. Focusing on cosmetics, the project included a variety of...
written examples that concentrates on the prompt – which was on Nymens Tips – and covers the topic by utilizing different genres of writing. Poems, editorials that would be at home in a magazine or newspaper, short stories, and essays to name a few were used in writing about this subject. Again, it is not clearly stated – if it is at all – what the benefits are to utilizing the various genres. I did not know why I was looking at these various pieces, finding the read increasingly frustrating due to feeling lost in what I was supposed to be learning from. He closes his thoughts before introducing the example by saying “I’ve learned to wish students Godspeed in pursuing topics that arise from the countryside of the soul” (7).

Beyond the frustrations of the author making grand assumptions of its readers, and the apparent necessity of being able to reference his previous books, there is value that can be gathered if one is willing to look. Due to the practical nature of multigenre writing, there are many examples of ways in which particular genres can be approached. There are chapters dedicated to introducing and implementing the different genres of writing; such as, dialogue, prose fiction, and poems to mention a few. He states the benefits of using specific writing techniques, such as how dialogue can be used in a research study to “illustrate how culture, idiomatic language, and one-right-answer teaching methods collude to make ESL students feel like fools” (60).

His chapter on poetry can almost serve as a “cliff notes” for teachers, going over the various benefits of writing such an ambiguous but simultaneously focused exercise. He provides strategies to help ignite the creative process, like providing students the “start of a line and ask students to follow it, writing rapidly . . . Frequently, they uncover language and perceptions that might lead to a poem” (92). He also lays the groundwork for why language on paper is so integral to a student’s learning, as their investments allows them to become more immersed in their subject. By having students branch out into different genres while covering the same subject, Roman asserts that this particular approach can allow for deeper and more meaningful analytical thinking that would otherwise be lost in a typical research project. Although not stated outright, there is an opportunity for a student’s interest in a specific topic to grow more organically; self-motivation being a prime factor in their own learning.

What I have been able to infer from my own reading, is that multigenre writing is an alternative method for a typical research paper. There is an inherent flexibility that this type of assignment provides, as students can pick and choose from the various genres they see fit in regards to their topic. One of Romano’s goals with this method is to allow “students with more conventional analytical minds to expand their cognitive repertoire and rhetorical skills by gaining further experience with narrative thinking, with knowing the world through story, poem, and song, through imagery, metaphor, and symbol” (56). That statement encompasses what multigenre is trying to accomplish, but I can’t help but see it as an attempt to answer all potential problems by having students do everything all the time. Perhaps some more information can be gleamed if the book was read in context to the other texts he frequently refers to; but as it stands, it leaves an impression that is all too confusing and frustrating to implement properly in a classroom as a standard. However, it is a very useful alternative from the boring research/essay papers that so many teachers fall on as a crutch.
Worksheets, red marks on papers, diagrams. Morning drills and quick quizzes. These are the sorts of things that we associate with traditional grammar instruction. Teachers hand out worksheets for students to learn the parts of speech, perhaps circling the nouns, underlining verbs and putting a star next to any adjectives. The students sometimes have morning drills where they seek out errors in sentences written on the board and maybe once a week they are quizzed on this knowledge. Then, when they write, they get to look forward to their papers coming back with those dreaded red marks.

Yes, these are the sorts of things many people think of when they are asked to consider grammar. This sort of instruction is seen across the United States. If so many teachers present it this way then it must be right. Right?

Constance Weaver would disagree. In her book, *Grammar to Enrich & Enhance Writing*, she claims that these methods simply do not work. They are used with the best of intentions, but they fail to accomplish what they set out to do, which is to improve students’ use of academic language. Learning does not occur in a vacuum, but teaching grammar separate from writing and literature is forcing it into one, a black hole where there is nothing for the students to connect it to, no way for them to understand how it applies to the other work that they do in class.

Weaver begins her book with a thorough explanation on why the old methods of teaching grammar do not work. She also points out that some teachers swing too far the other way, neglecting to do grammar at all. There must be a happy median, somewhere between the two that teachers can work with in order to improve their students’ grammar.

The second portion of Weaver’s book is dedicated to further dispelling the myths of grammar education and providing examples of what really works. Of highest import for Weaver is the emphasis on teaching grammar with writing. She tells the story of one teacher who went through an excellent lesson on sentence combining and then told the students to take out their books because they were finished with grammar for the day. Weaver states that there is never a time where grammar should be shunted to the side. Examples should be pointed out in texts, and especially in the writing process. Furthermore, the teacher should not mark up the students’ work and hand it back to them, hoping that they will learn from those red marks. Instead, the teacher should focus on guiding students, pointing out effective sentences when they appear in their work and asking where else they could apply it.

In another chapter, Weaver talks about sentence diagramming. If a teacher insists on diagramming sentences, Weaver suggests that they lead the students in discovering the function of each word within that sentence rather than innocuously labeling nouns, pronouns and the like. Only by comprehending function can students truly grasp what all of these labels mean.
Weaver not only spends time talking about how to better associate grammar with reading and writing, but she also dedicates a portion of the book to how English language learners and students from other cultures relate to the learning of academic language. She reminds the reader that not everyone speaks with the same dialect and that just because a certain dialect technically has grammatical errors that does not make the dialect invalid. There is a time and a place for making supposed grammatical errors in order to give the writing the desired effect for the reader.

No, grammar should not be taught in a vacuum. Rather, it should be taught as a tool to enhance the ability to communicate. Weaver does a wonderful job of showing the many ways this can be done, and in explaining a more practical approach to writing grammar. In the final third of her book she even includes essays by several other professionals in the field, which helps to lend her arguments validity.

If you are a teacher who wants to help your students improve their writing abilities, or just someone who interested in the different theories and ideas behind the teaching of grammar, this is an excellent book to read and I urge you to pick up a copy. Hopefully this can be used as a tool to not only connect grammar more directly to our students but also make them fear writing less and view it for what it is: the opportunity to express themselves and create.
Now They Have No Excuse

Review of Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time: Grades 4-12
ESTHER LEE


“Readers are not born; they develop.” (page 27)

How many teachers have heard students say that they hate to read or that all books are boring? Most educators have thrown up their hands in frustration when it comes to getting their students to read books assigned for the curriculum, let alone books for enjoyment. Reading is not only a skill that is required of students in school, but of people of all ages everywhere around the world. Yet, even though reading is such a widespread activity, getting students to crack open a book is like pulling teeth, wisdom teeth at that.

However, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Teri S. Lesesne’s Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time, Grades 4-12 guides teachers to being successful at what the title of her book promises: finding the right book for the right reader at the right time. Lesesne includes a series of vignettes written by popular, award-winning authors as they reflect upon their own feelings and memories of books and reading. The book also includes appendices that provide FAQ’s on young adult literature, bibliographies of professional materials, books by the vignette authors, and over twenty booklists with hundreds of books organized by genre or topic, all with suggested grade levels. Teachers, look no further. Making the Match will be the matchmaker for all your students, big and small.

Lesesne uses a personal approach by sharing her own experiences as a teacher and the strategies she has used to encourage reluctant readers to actually enjoy literature. The plethora of anecdotes and vignettes make this book both interesting and credible. Making the Match is not a scientific case study exploring the connections between the left and right hemispheres or how an unpronounceable part of the brain functions in connection to reading. No, this book is about concrete situations and strategies that can be used on real students with real personalities. Lesesne does not philosophize about the benefits of student reading, but provides teachers with actual lists of books that are popular and distinguished. She does not conjecture about imaginary personalities liking possible genres, but includes lists of books that are specifically written for students with specific preferences, such as easy reading, picture books for older readers, books to motivate reluctant readers, popular young adult books for teens, mysteries, short story collections, and the list goes on. The appendices even feature short summaries of each book in order to further help teachers narrow their book search.

Lesesne states that the primary way to encouraging reluctant readers to read is to pair them with literature they will enjoy. Common sense you say? It is not as easy as it sounds. Matching a book to a reader can be a long and arduous task when the students themselves do not have any preferences or do not even have an inkling of what they enjoy reading. Now for secondary teachers, multiply
that with 100, which is approximately the number of students they come into contact with every
day.

Lesesne simplifies the common difficulty of finding the right book to three simple areas: knowing
the reader, knowing the book, and knowing the techniques and strategies for bringing book and
reader together. These three areas correspond to the three parts that organize Making the Match.
Each chapter is paired with a vignette that directly addresses the following subject. These first-
hand experiences of various authors provide an introduction and a foundation to the anecdotes
and strategies Lesesne introduces in the chapter.

Part I defines the characteristic of young adults and the different stages and areas of their
development, such as physical, mental, emotional, and social. According to Edward Sullivan (2002),
young adults “dwell in a no man’s land. They are too old for children’s books and not nearly ready
for adult reading.” (13) Young adults who are not skilled readers would be caught dead than seen
reading a children’s book, but would not be able to understand the symbolism in The Scarlet Letter
or the disturbing elements in The Giver. Lesesne also emphasizes that the culture that surrounds
young adults plays a significant role in their lives. Thus, culture also needs to play a primary role in
how teachers approach this group of students and the books they suggest. At the end of Part I,
the book includes a useful survey that teachers can administer to their students. The survey asks
questions about how many hours the students read for enjoyment to music they enjoy listening
to. This survey would be immensely helpful in making the first step to matching books to readers.

In Part II, Lesesne guides teachers who do not know where they can begin finding worthwhile
books for their students. She gives accessible suggestions that would enable teachers to have
booklists at their fingertips in minutes. Lesesne also provides snapshots of various genres and the
potential misconceptions that teachers and students have of each. She then includes strategies and
activities that can be done with the students to expose them to the particular genre of literature.
For example, English curriculums tend to focus on reading dramas, instead of performing it, which
was how it was originated. The two suggestions given are to hold Readers Theater in the
classroom and ensure that the plays being shared with students could be performed or viewed in
some manner. Lesesne makes it even easier by listing websites and play collections that teachers
can access to learn more about Readers Theater or plays that would be optimal for performing in
the classroom setting.

If teachers would like more in-classroom ideas or resources, this book covers that base too. In
Part III, Lesesne provides more activities and assignments that teachers could assign to encourage
and ensure reading. These include specific questions that teachers could ask about the story, ideas
for books on tape, directions for reading logs, and conducting programs such as Silent Reading.

Making the Match is a valuable resource for teachers who would like to expose students to more
literature and have them asking for more. Students are inundated with required texts that they
need to write essays about and take tests on. “Sometimes [teachers] need to stand back and
allow kids the chance to read easy and enjoyable texts.” (36) As a teacher, I would much rather
have to call students back to earth from being engrossed in the story of Harry Potter attending
Hogwarts, than from making a real Mississippi River with drool across their never-opened copy of
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.
Designing Teachers

Review of *Teaching English by Design: How to Create and Carry out Instructional Units*

Nicole Marie Vermillion


For many teachers, one of the most daunting tasks of teaching is preparing a successful lesson plan, unit plan, or course plan that meets the needs of all students in the class. For new student teachers like myself, I constantly ask the question: How can I create one lesson or unit that will benefit everyone in the classroom? As teachers, we strive for success among every one of our students. Although many view the goal of meeting the needs of all of our students and having complete success with planning and teaching units to be a frightening experience, with the help of Peter Smagorinsky, this goal can easily be achieved. Have no fear... Peter Smagorinsky is here!

In his book titled *Teaching English by Design: How to Create and Carry out Instructional Units*, Peter Smagorinsky provides teachers with advice on creating successful instructional units without losing your mind! This heaven sent survival guide for English teachers is organized into three important and easy-to-understand parts: Teaching with students in mind, teaching writing within a unit design, and designing a conceptual unit.

Peter Smagorinsky believes that the only way for teachers to gain success is to explore and put to use their students’ ways of knowing. He argues that in general, “school assessment misses the point by ignoring many ways of knowing” (18). In the first section he constantly reminds teachers that assessment sets the terms for what teachers emphasize in instruction. Assessment is one of the most important aspects of learning because it allows teachers to know what level a student is at, as well as showing a student’s success in learning material taught in the classroom. He reminds us to remember the time when we were students, and when we felt that what we knew was not measured accurately by an assessment. Smagorinsky further explains that “instead of focusing on important concepts, it fixates on labeling their parts, and sometimes it seems that the more obscure, the better” (7). He urges us to keep assessment on task by asking ourselves what we want our students to know, and building a lesson plan around these ideas.

In Part I, he also discusses providing scaffolds for student learning, as well as alternatives to teacher-led discussion. Smagorinsky reminds teachers that by using concepts and tools across a variety of contexts, people will always benefit. He believes that scaffolds must be amendable to change as a learner grows. He provides clever ways of scaffolding in the classroom such as using double-column response logs as well as using comparison-contrast essays. He reiterates that scaffolding should be used when there are processes that require new kinds of complex thinking.

In addition to scaffolding ideas, Smagorinsky helps save teachers from mundane teacher-led discussions, and again puts the focus on the students. He urges teachers to use student-generated whole-class discussion, which relies on the students to produce the content of the discussion. He provides many examples of how to escape from teacher-led discussion, including using informal...
writing as a basis for discussion, putting an author on trial, creating a talk show, text rendering, graphic or material productions, and task-oriented small-group activities. Providing a plethora of activities, Smagorinsky cleverly puts an end to teacher-led discussion, and at last, holds students accountable for their own learning.

As if providing student engaging activities wasn't enough, Smagorinsky ends Part I by breaking down planning the whole course, saving new teachers from sleepless nights with coffee at hand. Smagorinsky creates standards for curriculum planning, including themes, strategies, stances, and aesthetic awareness. The teacher must know these goals for a lesson and unit in order to create activities and assignments that meet these goals.

Smagorinsky further becomes a hero to all teachers by dedicating the second part of his book to writing. Teaching writing is one of the most difficult tasks for teachers to teach and students to learn. In the beginning, Smagorinsky explains that you should “first think about what kinds of culminating texts students could ultimately produce from engagement with the material in each unit” (69). He urges teachers to picture the ultimate goal for students first, and then construct your unit based on these goals. He provides an example of unit tasks that eventually follow writing. He outlines units around the extended definition, literary analysis, and research reports.

Smagorinsky then dives into another realm of writing by discussing goals for unconventional writing assignments. He introduces the reader/future teacher to the idea of portfolios, personal journals, dialogue journals, and reading logs. For each he gives guidelines that both students and teachers should follow to ensure success with the activity. For example, with a dialogue journal, Smagorinsky suggests that students should not “simply summarize the literature read in class. [Students’] discussion should include questions, analysis, reflection, and evaluation. It should be evident that [students’] are learning something new through [their] dialogue” (87). In addition, he provides other ways to evaluate exploratory thinking including using unconventional genres such as a film or book review, a guide book, a letter to the editor, or writing a children’s book. Within each section of his book, Smagorinsky constantly provides new and exciting activities that will motivate and excite students. He explains that although students are responsible for these assignments, teachers ultimately are responsible for teaching students how to produce the elements the teacher asks for.

Concluding Part II, Smagorinsky provides teachers with excellent ways to respond to student writing other than the old-fashioned use of a red pen. He explains that it is healthy for peers to interact with one another, and peer feedback is an excellent way to respond to writing. Writing conferences are also useful because a student gets one-on-one time with a teacher during class to discuss a piece of writing. In addition, using rubrics is an excellent way to convey to students what is expected, as well as using it as a tool to correct their own paper and other students’ papers.

In the last part of Smagorinsky’s *Teaching English by Design*, Smagorinsky focuses on designing the conceptual unit, which can be a daunting task for new teachers like me. Before explaining how to create conceptual units, he first begins with why we use conceptual units. He immediately explains that “one key characteristic of a conceptual unit is that it involves students in a conversation that deepens as they progress through the texts, activities, and discussions” (112). Smagorinsky
further notes that “a conceptual unit typically includes a rationale, an inventory, goals, assessment, lessons, activities, discussion, texts, tools, and composing” (112). He then walks the reader step by step through each of these components, giving both definitions and examples of each and how they interact with one another. He explains that all of these components make a whole, and if one component is missing, the learning is not complete. Smagorinsky then categorizes units into seven different types including theme, period, movement, region, genre, works by a single author, and learning a key strategy. Like the components of a conceptual unit, different types of units should be used when there is a different goal at hand. He explains each type of unit, and clarifies when to use each. Part III is very organized and structured, subsequently making it easy for readers to understand and replicate his examples in their own units. Also, new teachers, like me, will find it invigorating to become more familiar with unit plans, as well as looking forward to the prospect of creating unit plans, instead of dreading it.

After Smagorinsky introduces the reader to the basics of unit design by defining an array of unit topics including such examples as protest literature, the Puritan ethic, success, frontier literature, the works of Mark Twain, cultural conflict, gender roles, and authors and artists in your state. He also provides advice for selecting material for your unit, which sometimes can be overwhelming for teachers. Smagorinsky explains that in selecting materials, teachers should take into account literary value, variety of textual forms, appropriateness, and variety of authorship. He explains that although teachers have earned their degrees in English and have taken part in traditional literary study, “Most of their students, however, will not view literature as a field of scholarship and will instead read for pleasure, escape, fulfillment, knowledge, personal connection, or other personal reasons” (136). To ensure success with materials chosen for unit plans, Smagorinsky encourages teachers to create a balance in the classroom of traditional literature they have studied, and literature that interests students.

In addition to creating unit plans around goals for students, Smagorinsky also urges teachers, especially new ones, to make sure every aspect of your unit has a purpose. Smagorinsky warns that teachers “must be ready to justify your teaching decisions, especially when they fall outside the range typical in your school” (147). He further states that “providing a convincing rationale for your choices is one way to become both a contented teacher and perhaps ultimately a curriculum leader in your school or district” (147). The more organized your unit plan is, including using content standards, the more success you will have inside and outside the classroom setting.

Next, Smagorinsky saves new teachers by teaching teachers how to outline a unit. He discusses the whole-course considerations such as negotiating thresholds (theme), self-determination (stance), and dramatic images (strategy). He then outlines a whole unit on the coming of age, which “explores the kinds of transitions that students make in moving from ninth to tenth grade” (150). He immediately chooses a unit that will be meaningful to students, thus assuring more motivation and interest for students. He carefully selects specific materials, including songs, poems, short stories, and an autobiography. For new teachers, he discusses unit goals, and the activities that match these goals. For any new teacher, this section of the book is so valuable because the author scaffolds the steps needed to ensure success in unit plans, and gives an outline/example a teacher could replicate for any subject or any grade.
He then delves into “setting up the construction zone,” or planning classes students can work productively toward the unit goals set in the previous section. Smagorinsky explains that “the construction zone metaphor characterizes how you might set up your classroom and anticipate your teaching needs. Doing so involves not only your students, but the community in which you teach, allowing yourself to anticipate various situations” (172). By knowing your goals and objectives, it will be easier for teachers to choose activities for the unit plan, including using the plethora of activities available to teachers in the previous sections of Smagorinsky’s book.

In the conclusion of Teaching English by Design, Peter Smagorinsky provides other introductory activities to help get your unit plan rolling. He provides many examples of initial activities, including writing about personal experiences, an Opinionnaire or survey, a scenario or case study, and a writing activity about related problems. Throughout each part of his book, Smagorinsky provides teachers with a plethora of activities to help stimulate success in unit plans, both for students, and for teachers.

In addition to these valuable activities, the last chapter of Part III is an example of a complete unit plan on discrimination, split up into 35 days over a 7 week period. Each day is organized with specific activities and that meet the goals and objectives of the lesson, including the time and materials needed. This model of discrimination Unit Plan can be so valuable to new teachers, and really puts into action the advice and steps provided in Parts I & II.

Whether you need instruction on teaching with students in mind, teaching writing within a unit design, or designing your own successful conceptual unit, Peter Smagorinsky is your man. Teaching English by Design is like a bible for new teachers; it will be your most important asset when creating lesson plans and conceptual units. Smagorinsky is a true hero to new teachers, and rescues them from dictated ‘traditional’ lessons that no longer have a meaning or purpose for students that are ever-changing, calling for constant revision. He not only focuses his book on the needs of students, but also puts a huge emphasis on the development of teachers, helping new teachers foresee future problems in the classroom. This book is a treasure to any new English teacher wanting to connect literature and make writing and literature meaningful to students.
Teaching Reading Is a Science and an Art

Review of When Kids Can’t Read: What Teachers Can Do A Guide for Teachers 6-12

Michelle Ghirelli

Beers, Kylene, When Kids Can’t Read What Teachers Can Do, A Guide for Teachers 6-12

“Teaching reading to adolescents is both rewarding and frustrating: it’s a science and an art. It’s making mistakes and growing from them. It’s the most important thing I do as a teacher” (22).

For Kylene Beers 1979 was a milestone year. Being a first year English teacher Beers was faced with the question, what do I do when kids can’t read? During her first year, while teaching the students in her seventh-grade language arts classes, she realized that some of her students couldn’t make any sense of the text, while others couldn’t even pronounce many of the words. This was also the year that she met a student named George. George couldn’t read and when his parents asked Beers to explain what their son’s reading problems were and what she was going to do to help she had no answers. Beers, a credentialed secondary English teacher, with no background in reading, realized that while she had little to offer the parents she had even less to offer their son. It was at this moment that made Beers want to answer the question, how do we help middle and high school student who can’t read, and 23 years of research later Beers shares what she has learned with us in her book When Kids Can’t Read What Teachers Can Do.

“Not all struggling readers sit at the back of the room, head down, sweatshirt hood pulled low, notebook crammed with papers that are filled with half-completed assignments, a bored expression, though that often is the image that springs to mind when we hear the term struggling reader” (14). The first part of Beers book, and probably one of the most important parts, is teaching us as educators how to not only find the struggling readers in our classroom but to understand why they are struggling and what we can do to help them. On pages 24-26 of the book Beers gives us direct and detailed behaviors of dependent readers so that as teachers we are able to pinpoint the problem and figure out what we need to do from there. Beers’ Instructional Plan (27) and If-Then Chart (28) give teachers the tools they need to create a strategy for helping the struggling readers. These tools help not only the teacher in helping their struggling students but also allow the teacher to give students’ parents a plan during conferences so that parents know that the teacher recognizes the areas of weakness and have a specific plan for strengthening those areas. One of the helpful aspects of Beers’ book is that it is designed as a handbook and therefore doesn’t need to necessarily be read from cover to cover, although I would advise any teacher to thoroughly read the book so as to make sure not to miss anything. In Beers’ If-Then Chart she lists behaviors that a teacher might see in a dependent reader and then directs the teacher to the appropriate chapters to find the strategies needed to help that child. This tool makes it much easier for teachers to find the right approach in helping their students become independent readers. Beers tells us that “once we can define what’s working
and what isn’t working, then we know how instruction should proceed” (24) and within the first
section of her book she gives us the strategies and tools to specifically identify our struggling
readers and access tools to help them.

Another helpful section in the book are chapters 6-8 which walks educators through the
process of teaching reading, whether it be a novel, short story, etc. Beers takes us through
different strategies starting with pre-reading, then during-reading and finally after-reading strategies.
In these chapters Beers give us tools and worksheets that we can use with our students as well as
examples of students work so that we are able to see what the students should be producing and
how to analyze the work. The most important part of these chapters are the question and answer
sections that she has at the end of each chapter. The questions that she has in these sections are
questions that came to my mind as I was reading. Having these answers at the end of the section
makes it more accessible for the teacher. As we are teaching these lessons and problems arise it is
much easier to flip to the end of the chapter and find the question we have and read the answer
rather than reread the entire chapter. This is another example of the accessibility and user-
friendliness of Beers’ book.

Throughout the book Beers gives teachers tools and techniques to use in the classroom
to improve their students’ reading levels. While most books deal with theory Beers goes a step
further and shows us her theory in practice. Beers gives us examples of her students’ work
allowing us as educators to see how to help that student. Along with the examples Beers has many
reproducible templates that we can use in our own classroom, from bookmark templates to graphic
organizers. This allows teachers to use her strategies from the book in their own classroom with
the guidance and instruction that she clearly lays out for us within her book. Beers also has a large
booklist of over 500 books separated by category that are able to grab the attention of even the
most reluctant reader because as teachers we sometimes learn, as did Beers, that sometimes a child
dislikes reading because they just haven’t found the genre or author that intrigues them.

By sharing her research of 23 years, Kylene Beers has provided educators with a fighting chance
when it comes to teaching reading in the classroom. However, although this book does focus on
putting Beers’ theory into practice and is full of helpful techniques and tools she reminds us of one
very important thing, “we must, at all times, remember that we don’t teach a subject, we teach you
– specific children with specific needs” (301). As educators we must always remember that when
teaching our children, whether they struggle or not, it is important to treat them as individuals and
as people rather than as a burden or a hassle. Our job is one that inspires young people but at
times we will be surprised at how much our students can inspire us. Throughout the book Beers
talks about the challenges of our job, however at the end she sums up the rewards of being a
teacher in one sentence, “to be called a ‘teacher’ might indeed be one of the greatest compliments
one could ever receive” (303).
Getting Graphic

A Review of Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels

Denica Maravilla


When staring out over a sea of forty teenagers, it is inevitable to feel a pang of panic when faced with teaching them the “classics.” As soon as the words Scarlet Letter come out of my mouth, students’ eyes seem to magically glaze over. In the golden age of Myspace and MTV, even the most engaging English teacher finds it tough to compete with Britney Spears and Gossip Girl. As we search for new and exciting ways to teach Beowulf to fifteen-year-olds, English teachers are still asking how we can make the classics more exciting for our students. According to James Bucky Carter’s Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels, graphic novels are the answer. In this collection of essays written by language arts teachers around the country, graphic novels are examined as tools for the secondary English classroom. In the book, Carter’s introduction emphasizes the significance of “an education that has been enriched with a broad definition of art and culture” (3), which includes “critical literacy, visual literacy, and other types of literacy” (1). Now that educators are beginning to understand the importance of including different types of literacy in their instruction, graphic novels are able to play a vital role in the classroom. The essays in the collection provide teachers with practical ways to integrate the graphic novel into a curriculum of traditional texts and uses specific examples of ways in which various graphic novels have been used to teach students reading comprehension and writing.

Carter makes a point in the first sentence of his introduction that “there is a graphic novel for virtually every learner in your English language arts classroom” (1). The graphic novel is not just a way to involve low performing students or ELL students, but can even be used in “teaching gifted students about morals and ethics” (17). He argues that graphic novels are flexible enough to teach a wide range of abilities and interests. Similarly, Fisher and Frey “have a hard time thinking about the ways in which a whole class novel can address all of our students’ needs” (27). They recommend using the graphic novel alongside other texts in a classroom structure that includes focus lessons, guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent learning. Some of their suggestions include using a graphic novel during guided instruction when it is key to match “the text difficulty with the needs of the group as well as the purpose of the lesson” (30). They use a lesson on tone and mood as an example when a teacher could assign one low-performing group a picture book entitled Faithful Elephants: A True Story about Animals, People, and War (Tsuchiya, 1951) while another group discusses Batman: Child of Dreams. In both groups, students learned about the ways an author creates a tone or mood with words, and later practiced creating tone in their own writing. Though the lesson focused on one particular objective, students were able to utilize different texts to learn the same lesson.

Other essays in the collection are useful in providing specific pairings of traditional texts with a graphic novel counterpart. For example, in Marla Harris’s “Showing and Telling History thought Family Stories in Persepolis and Young Adult Novels,” she outlines a unit that uses the graphic
novel, Persepolis, which tells the story of a young girl living in post-Revolutionary Tehran. She recommends using the text to “enter into difficult subject matter” (39), and “provide a bridge between students’ leisure reading, and the required reading” (39). Harris pairs the graphic novel with other adolescent literature including Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor and Before We Were Free by Julia Alvarez. These selections focus on the similar theme of families surviving through difficult political circumstances. In addition, the essay provides points of discussion and student activities to pair with the unit. Carter also pairs a traditional text, The Scarlet Letter, with The Amazing “True” Story of a Teenage Single Mom to “add to the students’ notions of Hester’s humanity” (58). He uses the graphic novel as a contemporary interpretation of Hester Prynne’s marginalization, providing teachers with specific comparisons of the texts and “guiding questions” (60) for students.

Even Beowulf, which can be difficult to use in the secondary classroom because of its dense language, is paired with Gareth Hinds’s “pedagogically valuable adaptation” (68) in J.D. Schraffenberger’s “Visualizing Beowulf: Old English Gets Graphic.” He argues that the “image of Grendel’s ripped-off arm hanging from the rafters of Heorot is not dissimilar to the kind of graphic images young people encounter in video games” (66). He champions the graphic novel for being able to entice young readers with the visual images, helping to “lighten some of the load of the text” (69), and allowing students to fill in the gaps when the language becomes too complex. Hinds also includes a list of discussion topics on language and artistic interpretation and also recommends various writing assignments to be used in conjunction with both the original and the graphic novel version.

Frey and Fisher also advise using graphic novels to teach writing in their essay, “Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School.” They cite a specific example when they used “Hydrant,” a “wordless six panel story that tells the tale of a woman living in a tenement building without running water” (134). Students were then asked to brainstorm descriptive words to tell the story shown in the images. Each student was then allowed to write the story out in words. Students, inspired by the pictures, wrote rich, detailed stories responding to the images. Carter also shares a writing lesson he calls “The Comic Book Show’ n’ Tell” which he refers to as “a unique spin on the writing workshop” (146). In short, he guides students through the complex process of creating a comic, which includes, creating “an authentic voice, editing, and details” (152). As English teachers, we stress these components of writing to our students, and creating a graphic novel gives students the metacognition required write a complete, well thought-out piece.

In addition to the useful advice given by the authors of this collection, there is an appendix of graphic novels that would be useful in an English Language Arts classroom. From fantasy to philosophy, the list ranges in topics and reading levels. It is a valuable tool for finding a starting point for using graphic novels in the classroom. This collection of essays is essential for any educator who is looking for a way to engage lackluster students or challenge enthusiastic students to think outside the parameters of the literary canon. It is for any English teacher who is fresh out of ideas on how to interest students in classic literature. Lastly, it is for anyone who themselves is tired of teaching the same texts year after year and getting the same mundane responses from their students. Now is the time to make a change in the way we teach literacy to adolescents and graphic novels are a great starting point. As Carter noted, “More success stories are needed” (21). Let’s show our students we haven’t run out of resources and that we are ready to compete with today’s highly visual entertainment industry by getting graphic.
THIS IS YOUR JOB!

Review of Acts of Teaching: How to Teach Writing

Erin Leigh Klibanow


There is no one-way to crack this riddle; yet, a competent teacher understands the model and knows various strategies to guide students through the new terrain. If you feel behind on this learned curve or could benefit from a few pointers and new activities, never fear, read on!

In Joyce Carroll Armstrong and Edward Wilson’s book, Acts of Teaching: How to Teach Writing, they describe and elaborate on the writing process from prewriting to assessment. The second portion of the book includes theory to help you understand the cognitive development of your students. Several appendices later, you can be assured that this book, though long, is easy to navigate and filled with multitude of useful strategies that can easily translate into your curricula. “Any subject can be taught to any child in some honest form,” it is your job to provide the tools clearly and in an effective regime (259).

Acts of Teaching: How to Teach Writing is broken down into three sections: I. The Process, II. The Theory and Pedagogy, and III. The Appendices.

PART I – The Process

“Help! I feel like teachers are reinforcing that panicky feeling we have when we’re asked to write” (3). In Acts of Writing: How to Teach Writing, Carroll and Wilson breakdown the process in a sequential order, while reminding the reader that steps can and should be revisited during the process and commingle: prewriting/creating, writing/organizing, rewriting/correcting, revising, reformulating, editing/checking, proofreading/polishing and publishing/distributing. Though the majority of the book is focused on creative writing, many of the principles especially in the prewriting section can be used in expository writing and research papers.

The list may appear ominous and overly detailed; yet, it is manageable. The perfect foreshadowing for Part I., the next two hundred pages filled with a dense amount of ideas and activities. However, teachers can easily access and envision Carroll and Wilson’s suggestions. “Students need sound, concrete ways to develop a sense organization and then a sound, concrete way to check it” (31). In prewriting, writing/organization, rewriting, and publishing students need the tools to succeed. The burden of knowledge lies heavily on the teacher to recognize the path and support students throughout the process. Below are a few of the most successful strategies.

“Effective use of prewriting allows for connections between what is taught and what is thought” (5). Carroll and Wilson offer many ways to get students writing. Two great methods are the writing roulette and dialoguing. The writing roulette is a strategy that yields a collaborative narrative. Students begin a story on individual sheets of paper and pass their papers to a different student when “Time” is called and so on. This is a fun and nonthreatening activity that can be used...
later in “mini-teaches on narrative, transitions, focus, voice, style…” (12). Dialoguing is used in conjunction with a text and usually encourages students to look back at the details of what they have read to create an accurate and fluid dialogue. Designed as a group activity, the group will produce one script and the class will be more familiar with the text after the activity.

Next Carroll and Wilson introduce the many genres of writing as well as the social act of writing, and grammar. Teaching students to write is more then instructions on a given topic armed with an idea of structure and proper grammar. “Modeling solidifies the purpose by showing the assignment as opposed to just telling it” (32). This section supplies the reader with a small dictionary of genres and ways to connect these writing styles with the student experience.

Teachers are encouraged to have students share their work. Group activity is a welcomed change to the solitary writing experience. “Most students write to the their teacher or some disembodied ‘they’ who score their writing on a test” (32). Carroll and Wilson have a list on “Strategies for Dividing Students into Writing Groups” in case the suggestion is not clear enough. Several are quite amusing and new. Number groups, birthday groups, color groups, genre groups, organic groups, and small groups (81). Feedback from your peers though initially intimidating for some, creates a new audience who provide feedback without penalties.

Grammar is often a charged area for students and teachers. Carroll and Wilson have taken two to discuss the issue: Grammar and Correcting and Grammar through Reformulation. Each is essential. Grammar and Correcting focuses on making the specific errors and similar to the prewriting section, the authors give many examples to help, such as the “Making the Comma Relevant” activity, which revolves around the story of a misplaced comma that resulted in a million-dollar loss (97). In Grammar through Reformulation, Carroll and Wilson present the difference between formula and strategy. “A formula is rigid, either/or; a strategy is flexible” (135). This sections works with grammar on a large scale and plays with the effectiveness of a paragraph rather then the details of a sentence. To instill this method, one activity Teaching Leads, asks students to read the leads from authors of several genres to raise their consciousness of “effective hooks” and then apply this standard to their own writing (149).

Publishing and assessment is the final phase. Carroll and Wilson include great visual instructions for book-making which incorporates four foldable techniques (167). This section supports their stance, that writers should have an audience and this element allows the process come alive for students. Regarding assessment, the authors believe that the holistic scoring system is best and give a detailed description of how to take on the difficult task (193). Another interesting portion was Myths about Assessment, which confronts topics such as “grading mean marking up a paper” and “it takes longer to grade writing” (186-7).

Despite performing the task, many teachers still miss the mark when instructing students in the writing process. They misinterpret the acts of prewriting, writing, rewriting, and editing (3). Perhaps they also misinterpret their students, so Carroll and Wilson included a section on brainpower and other theories on cognitive development to solidify their point. Teachers need to understand the entire student to implement strategies effectively.

PART II – The Theory and Pedagogy
“If the teacher does not risk a shaky hypothesis, why should the student?” (258) Joyce Armstrong Carroll and Edward E. Wilson strongly believe that understanding the cognitive process of your students is essential. The students are taking risks and they need to see the same risk-taking from you or your lesson may appear vapid. This line of reasoning supports the authors’ belief that modeling is essential to young writers development.

“In learning to write, the child must disengage himself from the sensory aspect of speech and replace words by images of words” (249). These are the words of Lev Semenovich Vtgosky and prove poignant as Carroll and Wilson narrate a long section on the abilities of a young mind. Carroll and Wilson reference many of the great educational theorists, including Jean Piaget and Benjamin Bloom and move into the arenas such as early literacy and writing as a mode of learning. The authors introduce strategies such as Tri-Folds and Dialectical Notebooks (337). The first gives students a feeling of ownership over material and the second allows students to revisit and reflect on their thoughts. At every stage, Carroll and Wilson give strategies for teachers to weave into their current lesson plans or formulas.

PART III – Appendices

Appendices, the final portion of this text reiterates the point that writing is a holistic process in which steps are often more connected then one might assume. Each essay asks the reader to question an idea such as the research paper, grammar, and “Write Before Writing” by Donald M. Murray (439).

Appendix A is a helpful list of Genres. Appendices B through J are professional essays previously published by the National Council of Teachers of English. Each addresses a different element of the writing processes and the majority include comments by Carroll and Wilson’s in the expanded margins.

Appendix E by Joyce Armstrong Carroll, “The Documented Essay” introduces an idea many teachers may have overlooked or forgotten. Students are asked to write research papers with numerous citations on various topics that are unrelated to their current experience. A documented essay is “research writing that includes a limited number of research sources, providing full documentation parenthetically within the text” (425). The teacher instructs students to select one resource, an interview, article, or television program and students are able to concentrate on one idea they know with more tenacity, honing their critical thinking skills, a method that as Carroll believes, “[Is] a win/win situation” (426).

Joyce Armstrong Carroll and Edward E. Wilson instruct the reader, probably a teacher or teacher in training, that the greatest burden during the writing process is on the teacher, not the student. Yes, students need to be accountable for producing work and staying on task, but to a large degree production relies on the methods being used to teach this often tricking and unnerving subject matter. The authors have done their best to give examples and further research in the text to support their position and have written this book, not to insult teachers that may be lacking. They ask the question pointedly, understanding that most teachers will not willfully admit that their methods are lacking. As Joyce Armstrong Carroll and Edward E. Wilson write, there is “more info but a poverty of attention” and so it was wise to have distinct parts to their book, allowing teachers to easily navigate the material (xxxviii).
Practice What You Teach

Review of *Writing With Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres*

Will Schaub


“I want to be gasping for air from the excitement of reading you” (120). This is the instruction Tom Romano gives to his students. This the way he writes. With passion. The word ‘passion’ appears countless times in his book, and “passion,” he states, “[is] at the core of my living and my literacy” (x). He writes with an urgency and determination to not merely challenge, but to annihilate the literary status quo. Speaking of his students, he states, “I want them to smash the conventional rules of writing and cut loose” (76). *Writing With Passion* reads like a manifesto- a call to arms to break the confining shackles of traditional writing instruction conventions. He is unrelenting in making his case and presenting many creatively liberating alternatives. And for this reader, he is remarkably convincing.

This book won’t appeal to everyone. Defenders of the sanctity of Standard English are likely to be offended, as will defenders of the sanctity of poetry, the traditional research paper, and even standard spelling. Purists intent on rigidly preserving virtually any aspect of writing instruction are bound to take issue with some portion of his book, so sweeping is Romano’s questioning of conventional standards. His argument for alternate writing styles stems from his unrelenting quest to help students access their inner voice. He advocates not for lax enforcement of established rules of writing but rather for the adoption of alternate techniques to allow writers to further explore and express with the written word. In promoting creative writing he seeks “writing that renders experience” (7). He further explains, “Students can render experience with such detail that readers don’t merely understand their meaning. They live it” (8). His own writing makes the point.

Romano makes a compelling logical argument for the importance of encouraging students to develop their creative writing skills. But the most convincing aspect of his book is his own writing. He presents instructional strategies, both his own and those discovered from others, that he models throughout the book for the reader. In extended narrative passages he draws from his own personal journey and evolution as a writer. Through these anecdotes, we get to know his father and feel the grief of his untimely death. We experience his grandfather’s immigration to the United States from Italy, and a man offering to buy his Aunt Filimon on Ellis Island when she was just a baby. Romano shares his writing process with us, illustrating the flash of inspiration and the painstaking process of developing, refining, analyzing, and synthesizing the final product. This is the diligence he seeks to instill in his students.

His instructional techniques are not all stark departures from the norm. But when he writes about journaling, quick-writes or listing, he emphasizes that these are not just time-fillers or busy work to occupy the students but a rich and valuable part of the creative process. He illustrates this point with examples of his own journal entries, detailing the refining process, explaining the struggle and decision making, and finally revealing the finished product. Perhaps equally illuminating are the many
samples of his students’ words. He presents a rich variety of writing that vividly demonstrate the
diverse forms the resulting work can take. He writes of the importance of teaching students to
create dialog (and the thrill he feels at spelling the word without the final “ue”). He extols the
liberating powers of poetry, tells of students writing and performing blues songs, and delineates
the virtues of sentence fragments, labyrinthine sentences, orthographic variation, and “crots”. He
presents examples of literary collages and montages, effective use of writing in double voice, and
collective writing projects cobbled together from multiple authors. All of these devices are tools
he uses to push his students to “do whatever necessary to generate original thinking and lan-
guage” (102).

Romano credits author Winston Weather’s book An Alternate Style: Options in Composition for
changing his concept of what writing can be. Weather’s book defines Grammar A as Standard
English and Grammar B as “an alternate style” that takes “liberties with Grammar A sentence
structure, syntax, spelling, voice, and form” (75). The two authors agree that Grammar B is a le-
gitimate and powerful style used by many competent writers for hundreds of years. For Romano,
the old adage that conventional rules must first be understood before they can be broken does
not apply. Of his most memorable students he states, “They knew instinctively that any rule of
writing could be broken if the end result was writing that worked” (76). He takes us through
example after example of Grammar B techniques and the liberating power they have on his own
and his students’ writing. His compelling ideas and the beautiful, original, and powerful writing that
they produce become increasingly hard to resist.

Romano credits another book, Michael Ondaatje’s The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, for inspiring
a written work he calls ‘the multigenre research paper’. Romano walks us through the process of
discovering the idea of having students thoroughly research a person or subject, and then create
written works of various genres that combine to “render experience” for the reader. A com-
pleted multigenre research paper may include poetry, journalistic writing, narrative, dialog, even
song. He speaks of urging, cajoling, and pushing his students to use their journals to try new gen-
res (118). He analyzes honestly the perceived successes and shortcomings of his techniques and
the way he has taught them. Again, the power of the completed multigenre papers he presents is
impossible to deny.

Throughout Writing With Passion, creativity, truth, and passion are Romano’s guiding principles. Of
his quest to tap his students’ creativity, he reveals, “I’m talking about the real thing—when intel-
lect, emotion, and imagination merge; when analysis and synthesis are one; when writers, painters,
sculptors, dancers, composers, physicists, ecologists, historians, take that which is outside them
and bring it inside, intimately, then give it back with form, imagination, and meaning, stamped in-
delibly with their own personal voice and vision” (129). This is the way he writes. He not only
teaches, he inspires. Every writing teacher has something to gain from reading his book, be it his
myriad new ideas for teaching students or simply to be reinvigorated by the abundant passion
Romano displays. For he does practice what he teaches, and I am left gasping for air from the ex-
citement of reading him.
“...And Metacognition for All”

Review of *Word Wise and Content Rich, Grades 7-12: Five Essential Steps To Teaching Academic Vocabulary*

KEVIN SHAHRAUM WEIGAND


In the average secondary school classroom, there is a deficiency in the teaching methods that provide students with comprehensive vocabulary skills. In *Word Wise and Content Rich*, a succinct evaluation of current methods for teaching comprehensive vocabulary as well as an “intentional vocabulary model” (5) for improving such methodology is provided. Both Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey are well-established authors in the field of full spectrum literacy in secondary school education and are also faculty members at San Diego State University and Health Sciences High and Middle College.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey cite a rich variety of sources to show the need for teachers to elevate common educational approaches to in-depth content literacy. Throughout *Word Wise and Content Rich*, the authors weave a compelling argument for the importance of vocabulary in not just reading but in writing, speaking, thinking and overall academic achievement. Such an argument is important because it highlights vocabulary as a fundamental tool in any classroom. Sadly, the general consensus of the authors is that vocabulary instruction in the average secondary school classroom is neglected due to several discrepancies in both material and methodology, such as unstructured word lists and improper review of the words that are taught. The ensuing chapters of *Word Wise and Content Rich* focus on effective strategies for teachers to properly choose and teach comprehensive and functional vocabularies for their students.

Vocabulary is an overlooked denomination of education, as Fisher and Frey point out. It is often easily overlooked and relegated to over-contextualized lessons. Correcting this assumption, Fisher and Frey, in frank and concise terms, introduce their intentional model by highlighting the importance of proper material. Choosing which words to teach is just as important as the manner in which they are taught and an inspiring model for proper word choice is provided in Chapter 2.

Fisher and Frey’s model is called intentional because the decision to teach certain words and methodologies for learning those words is based on “a gradual release of responsibility model” which was originally developed by Pearson and Gallagher in 1983. Within the framework of this model, the teacher incorporates vocabulary instruction into every step of the learning process in an effort to get students to make contextual connections on their own. In particular, three major areas; demonstration or modeling, practice with peers, and independent application make up the fundamental application of their adopted model. The authors proceed to break down these three areas into barrages of techniques and theory that amount to an effective step in implementing
improved vocabulary instruction in secondary school.

The concept of using examples or modeling to instruct is nothing new, but Fisher and Frey, as they do with all three of their major concepts; elevate a relatively simple idea by suggesting that teachers give their students “an approximation of the thinking required” (46) to understand certain words. The text provides two major techniques for the teacher who wishes to model the thinking process as an inroad to deciphering advanced vocabulary: context clues and morphology. With context clues the teacher is encouraged to explain to the students how words are typically used and with morphology how words are typically composed from standardized pieces. Throughout their explanation of these techniques, Fisher and Frey provide classroom scenarios wherein the techniques are applied which are extremely helpful to the reader.

Fisher and Frey, in their deceptively frank and simple tone, advocate practical application via peer instruction as an effective method of teaching vocabulary. Working with peers, working with visual cues or word maps as a classroom and students as a group, actually writing and creating new contexts for new words, is the basis of the next series of vocabulary oriented exercises provided by Fisher and Frey. This chapter is more effective not only because it provides actual exercises but also because it explains the benefit of each exercise as it relates to teaching vocabulary. Of course, every teacher incorporates group study into lesson plans; however, if they keep in mind the intentional model then they can create effective ways of “shifting the cognitive load to the learner” (91) so that proper vocabulary seeding may take place.

The last step in Fisher and Frey’s well thought out method is to instill a sense of self-reliance in the student. Ultimately, the authors are leaning towards a very liberal and open-minded approach to teaching which is refreshing. Instead of assigning anything tedious to the students, the authors recommend that the students be given more control over what assignments they do and also be given the ability to evaluate their own performance and keep track of what they have learned. Although the idea of a student maintaining a wholly unbiased opinion of their own performance is a bit wishful, the idea of giving a student the task of “consolidating their understanding of academic vocabulary terms” (109) through the myriad of ways that Fisher and Frey present is refreshing and original. Ultimately, the sense I got from reading the authors’ comments on individual learning frameworks were some of the most inspiring I have yet heard on the topic. Ultimately Fisher and Frey make a significant point; that individual learning techniques instill a sense of confidence in students, this insight poignant.

It is worth noting that Fisher and Frey are weaving a rich carpet of theory and practice over what is, at best, a nominal subject that is often taken for granted. Vocabulary instruction is often left to English teachers whereas it relates all subjects of secondary school and the authors make a point of highlighting how vocabulary incentives can be imposed on a school wide level. Throughout the text, Fisher and Frey emphasize the use of vocabulary in the science classroom or in the math classroom. They further outline how an entire school can refocus attention to vocabulary learning by using WOW (or word of the week incentives) and assigning a wide variety of texts for students. WOW incentives involve a wide range of subjects, and through the use of SSR (or sustained silent reading) as well as independent reading, schools can encourage their students to develop their word knowledge by providing them with supplemental lists of words and books that will create a broad, shared learning experience.
The final chapter of *Word Wise and Content Rich* focuses on developing a teacher’s ability to sustain prolonged vocabulary instruction through a summation of the methods outlined in the previous chapters and a list of different texts that Fisher and Frey use on a regular basis to inform their own teaching. The authors have presented a very spirited and progressive model for teaching content literacy, yet have managed to keep the language simple and direct. As a whole, this text is a great source of positive and concrete ideas that any secondary school teacher can incorporate into their lesson plan. Fisher and Frey show that by simply focusing on vocabulary skills teachers can empower and inform students both in and outside the classroom in a variety of subjects.

Review of Letters to a New Teacher: A Month-by-Month Guide to the Year Ahead

Shirliza Guadamuz


On the first day of school, new teachers full of fresh idealism, with visions of the perfect lesson plans, and crisp mental images of enthusiastic and interested students, enter their classrooms. Ready to make a difference in the lives of their students, these teachers eagerly anticipate the start of the day. Then the bell rings and reality strikes.

Within days the mounting paperwork, classroom management issues, and struggle to engage students begs the question: “how do you manage a group of thirty-five…who won’t stop talking and pay attention?” (4). Thus begins the exchange of letters captured in Jim Burke’s book with Joy Krajicek, *Letters to a New Teacher: A Month-by-Month Guide to the Year Ahead*.

The premise of this book is simple. Krajicek, a first-year teacher at Burlingame High School, seeks out Burke, a nationally recognized, oft published, expert teacher on the same campus, to be her mentor. He accepts. What follows is an informal, yearlong collection of Krajicek’s honest questions and Burke’s frank responses in the form of letters, categorized first by months of the traditional school year and then by the questions posed. These letters are ordered chronologically as Krajicek asks questions aligned with the calendar highs and lows that comprise a teacher’s school year, which he refers to as a cycle of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.

…Brueggemann saw life as divided into three phases that correspond to three different types of psalm: orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Orientation refers to things as we know them: a world we understand, that is familiar; it is the world in which we feel competent, confident…Then something comes along…and causes in us a deep sense of disorientation…. Such moments are characterized by doubts about whether we should ever have become teachers, fear that we will not succeed, despair that we will never find our way back home to that feeling of orientation we so enjoyed. It is precisely at this darkest moment of doubt, however, that something often happens that creates a new orientation, a new vision of who we are or should be, what we can or must do (58; emphasis in original).

Throughout the letters and interludes, namely emails, topics such as dealing with parents, balancing work and life, struggling with difficult students, and handling student crises are covered. There are no trite or glib answers to be found. Each letter is a carefully and thoughtfully crafted response to the realities of teaching, both beautifully rewarding and heartbreaking. Burke shares personal experiences, anecdotes, and references to additional resources to illustrate his points. A particularly stirring story comes in a letter responding to question 18, dealing with student suicide. Burke recounts a time in his first year of teaching when a student attempted suicide and then wrote about the experience in his class journal weeks later—in vivid detail. Fortunately, the student’s
suicide attempt was unsuccessful; an unexpected intrusion by his mother saved his life. Other students did not share the same fate. Still, Burke explains how we, as teachers, work so hard to know our students, to hopefully prevent such tragedies, while also discussing how important it is to recognize our limits.

They spend fifty minutes a day with us, one of a herd of often angst-ridden teens, and yet we feel like we should know every detail of each student’s life. But we cannot know them all so well, so we can only care and make sure they know we care so if they do end up feeling the way that boy did, they can come to us (126).

So, how do you know if you are making a positive difference? Check question five. Want to know if you’re the only one weighed down by self-imposed pressures? Read Burke’s response to question three. Are you struggling with parent-teacher relationships? Flip back to question 19. Need suggestions for what strategies work best for teaching in the classroom and why? Read and re-read question nine.

While this book may not provide you with cure-all solutions or quick-fix answers, the wisdom of a life devoted to teaching emanates throughout these letters. I find myself revisiting this book monthly as I progress in my classroom. Questions that I have are frequently addressed in the exchange between Krajicek and Burke. And yes, some questions appear more than once, with answers shifting to the new context of time and experience.

As a new student teacher, I still find the challenge of engaging and teaching eighth grade students to be a daunting task. Like my peers, I need a willing and patient mentor to guide and calmly reassure me as I enter the field of teaching. Through the candid questions of Krajicek and the sincere responses of Burke, I have found one whom I can carry with me any time, any place.

Not to be dismissed is the vulnerability Krajicek is willing to endure by asking her poignant questions. As Sam M. Intrator and Parker J. Palmer phrase it in the foreword, Krajicek has “the passion to be a great teacher and feel[s] so wanting of the tools” (xvi). This statement resonates deep within me.

The beauty of this book is its portability and foundation of experience. Jim Burke is not your everyday veteran teacher. Inducted into the California Reading Association’s Hall of Fame in 2001, Burke has a long list of accolades and published works, coupled by his continuing teaching career at Burlingame High School. Add to that the intentional structuring of this book into questions and letters, it is an easy resource to flip through for specific suggestions. As he suggests in the text, it is a great idea to always have a poetry book or other collection of essays or letters on hand when in the copy room, when waiting in line at the store, or when printing large documents at your desk. These are all opportune times to read a brief, but salient, passage to refresh, renew, and stretch the mind.

Burke understands the time demands that we teachers face. He shows that even a brief experience with the literature that we love can stoke the flames of our passions for teaching. When Krajicek asks how he manages to “do it all” (96 & 163), the beginning of his response says it all: “that you ask a question near the end of the year that troubled you in the beginning of the
year shows you how enduring these challenges are and will remain” (163). While overburdened teachers frequently relegate pleasure reading for the summer months, Burke resoundingly warns against such a practice. Teachers teach through modeling. This includes reading for pleasure. Burke emphasizes the importance of reading and writing often, if for nothing else than to remind one of what it’s like to be a student. Remaining practiced in the craft of your teaching keeps you honest and energized. Your writing need not be perfectly crafted essays on the importance of Walt Whitman’s poetry to the world, but may simply be an apt haiku or couplet. The idea is that creativity brings energy.

So, as I look forward to the day when I, too, will enter my classroom as a first-year teacher, I will bring with me youthful idealism, labored over lesson plans, and hope for the students assigned to my classroom. But I will also have a secret weapon when reality strikes: Letters to a New Teacher. Within its pages, Burke and Krajicek will be with me to help “make sense of the good and bad days of classroom life” (xv). So let the bell ring and the school year start; I’ll be ready.
Their Challenge, Our Challenge

Review of *Language Learners in the English Classroom*

Kaycie Gordon


“For adolescent English language learners, life's circular path is as large or as small as their language will take them. As English teachers, it is our role to make that circle as encompassing as possible” (*Language Learners in the English Classroom* 15).

Douglas Fisher, Carol Rothenburg, and Nancy Frey, all distinguished individuals with notable work in English language and literacy development, have come together to create one of the more practical and easy to read books for teachers working with English language learners. Their book, *Language Learners in the English Classroom*, reaches out to those of us who have dedicated our lives to the English teaching profession, whether we’ll admit it or not. The book begins by explaining to readers the variant levels and backgrounds of English language learners entering the classroom. Later, it reveals an adequate four-step model and strategies teachers can use to not only increase language progress, but also allow the language learners themselves to take responsibility for their own learning, lessening dependability and increasing self-sufficiency. And while many instructional books published are only books of recent pedagogical trend and forgotten when new trends arise, *Language Learners in the English Classroom* will remain anchored as an English teacher necessity, a lasting roadmap and valuable resource concerned with the realities of today’s diverse classrooms and the needs of English Language Learners within them.

The authors introduce the book by determining the diversity of students in modern classrooms around the country, examining the role of English language learners and the fascinating demographical changes in public schooling over the last ten years. And while “the vast majority—nearly 80 percent—hail from Spanish speaking countries… states reported over four hundred languages spoken by students identified as ELL” (5). The authors show readers the vast array of cultures, backgrounds, skills, and needs among these students and the challenges of determining which students need what kind of instruction. Their focus, however, falls on Generation 1.5, “arguably the largest group of English language learners who have been in the U.S. school system perhaps since kindergarten, but have stagnated at low levels of literacy” (7), thus typically unable to communicate in academic settings. More clearly, this “generation” uses oral discourse and has acquired language, but has not truly learned it. Further, the students’ use of language does not vary according to situations, applying their everyday English in the classroom, and thus failing to create grade-level work (7, 11). This is a problem the authors of this book focus in on and provide convincing methodological approaches to its solution, or the beginnings of one, by revealing the four areas of classroom instruction needed: vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension, and giving easily applicable strategies for such instruction.
These four basic tenets, the authors argue, are crucial in the continuing progress and further development of students seemingly “stuck” in moderate stages of literacy, those who need significant improvement in their academic skills and language. As the book takes readers through concise and to-the-point chapters which focus on each of the essential skills, the authors not only discuss why each skill is so important for students at an English language learning level, but also model step by step instructional activities teachers can apply in their classrooms for the betterment of all students. Rather than simple theoretical arguments, the authors provide model activities that can be incorporated into everyday lesson planning. This is exemplified in Chapter 3, initiated by this statement: “[V]ocabulary knowledge is directly related to reading comprehension” (39). The authors present an argument that disadvantaged students as a whole, and more specifically ELLs, have far less opportunity to acquire vocabulary and easily fool their teachers into thinking they are equally skilled in conversational language and academic language, which is too often not the case. Their academic language, both verbal and written, “lags significantly behind their conversational skills” (40), which, in combination with the heavy vocabulary load placed on them at the secondary level, leaves students overwhelmed and in need of both “direct instruction in core vocabulary and opportunities for wide reading” (41). After a discussion of the basic vocabulary problem at hand, the chapter guides readers page after page toward tactile solutions including SSR and other individual reading times where students do the work (acquiring vast amounts of words which teachers could not possibly have time to teach directly), as well as more specific teacher-directed strategies such as “Read-Alouds” and “Words of the Week (WOW)” programs.

Just like the chapter discussed above, the authors continue in the following chapter with an in-depth analysis of grammar instruction and assert that traditional teaching will no longer suffice. They suggest that in order to impress grammar rules into students’ long-term memory, using students’ own written work as fodder for instruction is the most successful alternative, not to mention an obvious convenience. And again, in their next chapter regarding fluency, the authors incorporate along with reading and writing, the importance of oral fluency, both in private and public sectors. Activities, such as classroom speeches, reader’s theater, power writing (a timed writing activity), all play important roles in allowing students the opportunity to eventually “sound educated…get a good job, participate in the economy and engage with other human beings” (85). As the authors note, “Students will not develop fluency…from simply being exposed to language” (85), but rather, as English teachers, it becomes a duty to keep fluency at the forefront of instructional practices.

In an attempt not to entirely disclose the book’s contents, I’ll simply note that each chapter follows similar patterns such as those provided above. The authors have created a manual of sorts, including full coverage of important skills and application of those skills within each chapter. And yet it would be a mistake to end here, to fail to mention anything beyond descriptions of specific chapters. Instead, I am inclined turn our attention to the more generalized theme of this book, a clear ideological message from the authors that a severe need to improve literacy for these students is at hand, and that it must be implemented immediately. Fisher, Rothenburg and Frey hope we English teachers will lead the way, collaborating with other content area teachers, “provid[ing] resources and support for their colleagues” (77), and working as a cohesive unit to establish goals which will improve ELL language and literacy. Basically, it cannot stop at the English classroom door, but must instead be an instructional obligation for all subject area teachers. Just as important for improving their skills and speeding up the learning process for these students, the authors suggest that
“[teachers’] responsibility should decrease over time” (34), and to do so, teachers must teach the four step gradual release of responsibility model provided in the book. More clearly, the English teacher’s duty is to provide for our ELLs skills and strategies, or meta-cognitive practices, in order that they may begin to learn on their own. The most difficult and yet important gift English teachers can give English language learners is the gift of responsibility, the gift of self-sufficiency, so that when they embark out on their own, we have taught them the skills to not only get by, but to succeed.

It has become an epidemic in our schools: our English language learners are slipping through the cracks. We are pushing them along, grade-by-grade, whether they have sufficiently met grade level requirements or not. It is now the time, more than ever, that we English teachers become an active voice for these students, rather than a passive bystander waving them out our doors and wishing them well for the next year. We are robbing them of the education they not only need, but the education they deserve. I urge those doubting voices who are convinced these books do nothing for increasing anything but the wallets of the writers, to take a chance on Fisher, Rothenburg and Frey. They have proved themselves worthy of providing adequate information and tools to help us begin our journey of instructional reinvention. And we must begin now.
Shifting the Focus  
A Review of “You Gotta BE the Book”  
Morgan Proctor

$21.95

As newly credentialed English teachers learn the methods and mannerisms of the trade, there is always a huge emphasis placed on the books one should select, the standards they meet and the “important stuff” the students need to learn from each text. As a result, countless school hours are spent practically begging the students to read the novel, poem or story and strong-arming the students into giving well-reasoned, thoughtful responses that often deal solely with the words on the page. Amidst this struggle between teacher and student, the text still remains the primary authority on the class lesson - never the people actually involved in the lesson. Rarely do the students or instructor have a good time, and the student never engages with the text in a way that creates meaning or results in retained knowledge.

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm’s You Gotta BE the Book attempts to bridge the gap between text and reader, between the book and the student. Until the two meet, Wilhelm posits, classrooms will continue to fill up with period after period of apathetic, unengaged readers. Wilhelm’s book fits neatly in the space between New Criticism, which demands readers keep their emotions and experiences far away from the text, and reader response theory, which occasionally forays into the minds and hearts of readers unto the point of sentimentality; it also fits neatly into the Constructivist methods finding a place in many teachers’ repertoires. In Wilhelm’s classroom and the classrooms of those teachers that have read his works, the reader and the text are of equal standing, making and creating meaning together. Emblematic of Wilhelm’s attempt to shift the focus away from the text alone are his protocols, particularly his Two-Column Written Protocols. Here, the text takes up half the page, leaving the rest open for student responses in the form of questions, pictures, doodles, statements, general feelings, and, perhaps most importantly, what they are doing as readers in given points in the text. With the protocols, the student is made aware, visually or otherwise, that meaning is derived in a symbiotic relationship between the text and the reader. Without them, the book is just ink on paper.

Wilhelm’s book is less a listing of potential methods and lesson ideas (though it contains a plethora of useful information) and more a new way for instructor’s to present literature and guide the students through it. It gives teachers a new way to think about reading, and the order in which we focus on specific elements of reading. In this book, Wilhelm takes us through his own experiences as a teacher and highlights the stories of a few particular students, both “good” and “bad” readers, and talks about what approaches to reading worked best in engaging all students. The reader-centered classroom (as Wilhelm envisions) involves students in actively examining the text in conjunction with their own experiences and ideas. Wilhelm discusses different lessons and methods to allow students to think about themselves as part of the story, almost a fly-on-the-wall observer that processes all the author’s ideas and comes out with meaning, emotions and
commentary. Additionally, Wilhelm devotes two chapters to the usage of drama and the visual arts in reading response – further attempts to engage the students as emotionally and intellectually invested participants with the text, not passive consumers of words or ideas. His goal is to turn every reader into a good reader.

Many students graduate high school without ever having defined what a good reader does, what literature excites them and engages them, and what literature can do for them as people. Wilhelm structures the book around these ideas and the research he has done with various students; his key goal, however, is to determine what an engaged reader does when he or she reads, and to figure out a way to teach students (and have the students teach one another) these tactics. What naturally results from his studying and focus on reading techniques is a classroom full of students who were interested in the work, identifying with the work and picking apart the work in very sophisticated ways. The students were automatically analyzing characters, looking for themes or motifs, figuring out the main ideas, and examining how the author makes an impact through the text. What prompted this sudden abundance of explication was the readerly instinct to get into the text, create the world in one’s head and play around in it. The good reader blends the boundaries between text and reader, and shares a mental, emotional and social connection with the characters and events of the piece. What Wilhelm has done with *You Gotta BE the Book* is compile various student experiences, teaching methods and reading devices that serve in creating a classroom where the students’ enthusiasm drives the class, not the instructors’ desire to keep moving through the book.

In addition to Wilhelm’s desire to shift the literary focus in a classroom, he implores teachers to begin thinking differently about the literary content we bring into classrooms and the media we ask students to use in processing the text. Through his student research, Wilhelm found that engaged readers of all stripes read a variety of types of text: magazines, heady novels, “light” novels like mysteries and romances, comics, graphic novels, philosophy and so on. As a result, Wilhelm suggests that instructors provide opportunities for students to read texts from a variety of media and genres. In the actual working with the text, Wilhelm gives teacher a wide array of writing, art, drama, music and discussion techniques to illuminate the text and allow the student to personally connect to the text.

What Wilhelm envisions, and seeks to inspire in each educator that reads this enlightening book, is a classroom where students work with a variety of texts and use drama and art, songs and skits, words and images when examining and experiencing the text. Most of all, the students in this active classroom are participants with the text, and willfully and joyously engage with it.
The Joy of Poetry!

Review of *Power & Poetry: Best Practices for High School Classrooms*

Jill Novick


If you asked most high school students or high school teachers for that matter, what they thought of teaching poetry in the classroom they would probably tell you about the drudgery of explicating a poem, line by line, symbol by symbol, metaphor by metaphor. Or they might talk about meter, stressed and unstressed syllables and how little it tells you about the poem itself and how it makes you feel. Jim Mahoney’s and Jerry Matovcik’s book *Power & Poetry* does just the opposite. It is a recipe book for teachers on how to successfully teach poetry to secondary school students. This wonderful book shows how reading, writing and teaching poetry can be fun, therapeutic, and thoroughly rewarding. As Jim states in his preface, the book guides you through “an exciting journey in using poetry to empower students and to enrich their lives and yours” (x).

The book is written for high school teachers, particularly English teachers, but it is appropriate for anyone who is teaching reading, writing and analysis. Mahoney and Matovcik, veteran educators, show how to integrate poetry into a curriculum with tasty and creative ideas that would inspire any teacher. Peppered with clear examples of their methods, the book is filled with their own poetry and the poetry of their students to show the kind of work their lessons produce. My favorite part of the book — getting to read the poetry of these high school students and seeing the writing that evolved out of these passionate teachers’ lessons — enhanced my reading and understanding of the material. It was like getting to taste the food after following a recipe in your favorite cookbook. The authors believe that “Poetry is power” (4), and when you read some of this poetry, you will believe it too. Much of the poetry written by students in this book brought me to tears.

The first chapter covers the authors’ thoughts and feelings about teaching poetry and gives the reader an idea of their pedagogical process. Mr. Mahoney feels “that writers need frequent exposure to reading poetry and ample opportunity to write it all year long. Poetry needs to be integrated with all of the work studied throughout the year, not compartmentalized into four short weeks of a unit. It shouldn’t be a unit unto itself but should be part of each unit” (5). I found this to be a very meaningful observation. Why not have your students reading and writing poetry all year long? Why does it need to be taken out and forced into a certain time period? I think this approach not only demystifies poetry for students, but makes it more accessible and less intimidating right from the start. It gives students a chance to develop a better understanding and appreciation for it. Mahoney also notes that he starts off the school year, on the very first day, not by talking about the rules of the classroom, but by giving his students two poems to look at about going to school. He doesn’t analyze the poetry with his students, but allows them to connect to it and immerse themselves in it. The students are asked to respond to the poems by writing about their own feelings about school or how they are feeling on that particular first day.
of school and are therefore seeing “poetry in action” (6). This approach lets the students start the class with a clear idea of what they will be experiencing and a safe, non-threatening environment in which to experience it.

One important ingredient they use with great success is “The Writer’s Notebook.” Each student keeps one of these notebooks to record all of their writing. They are not collected or read by the teacher, they are for the sole use of the writer to record thoughts and observations. Students are encouraged to write everything down, no matter how small, all of their ideas or morsels of writing, and are shown through modeling that even though something they wrote might not seem to be anything, they might go back later and find a gem. Different from journal writing, “The Writer’s Notebook” is an opportunity for students to use what they record in them to further develop their writing. It gives them the freedom to pick and choose what they like or what they want to be seen or heard by their teacher or peers. They can go back and re-read, and revise what they have written whenever they want because it is all right there in their notebooks. It is a non-threatening way for the students to keep track of what they write, without the fear of having to turn it in or be graded on it. It is also, as Mahoney points out, a lot less reading and responding to work for the teacher.

Another essential ingredient to appreciating and writing poetry discussed in this book is observation. Much importance is placed on giving students the time to observe their surroundings. Whether it takes place in the classroom looking out the window, outside of school on their own or on fieldtrips with the class, letting student writers observe their surroundings gives them the “opportunity to look at ordinary sights and sounds and to see them in ways they had not noticed before” (12). Both authors point out that allowing the students to get out of the classroom and go on nature walks and fieldtrips is also a good way to introduce Nature poems to your students.

Modeling and scaffolding is used throughout the book and the curriculum to show students and teachers how it can be done before expecting them to attempt it on their own. In every lesson other poems are used as examples to show whatever they are teaching. At the end of each semester students hand in a portfolio of their work that contains their top five favorite poems along with reflections on their writing. Mahoney addresses the difficulty of grading their work in one of the final chapters. He believes that putting a grade on a piece of writing is detrimental to the process. Instead he uses these portfolios to evaluate what his students have learned in his class. He asks them to annotate their writing, pointing out certain skills that they have learned throughout the year. This way he can see how they apply what he has taught them to their own writing and demonstrate it to him without having to worry about taking a test on it.

The book also contains chapters on quick writes, recording early memories, writing gift poems, peer conferencing, revising, writing extended metaphors, responding to art, unpacking poems, autobiographical poems, poetry circles, poetry readings and scaffolding poems. It is a smorgasbord of teaching poetry techniques. Written by two teachers who unselfishly share their passion for poetry with other educators and sprinkled with love and anecdotes from their lives, and the lives of their families and students, the result is a powerful testament to their approach to teaching. Anyone reading this book will surely see the power… and the joy, of poetry!
What Am I Doing?

Review of *13 Ways of Looking At Student Teaching: A Guide for First-Time English Teachers*

ANNETTE OVANESSIAN


*ISBN 0-325-00551-6*

IMAGINE walking into a classroom with thirty sets of eyes staring at you waiting for instruction. Imagine at that moment, you shut off completely. Your palms begin sweating and your heart rate increases rapidly; and you are lost, with nothing to say.

Fear and anxiety are often the cause of headaches for first-time teachers. They have many questions, concerns and struggles, and need honest solutions. Thankfully, there is hope for answers. In *13 Ways of Looking at Student Teaching*, Mike “Wiggs” Rychlik and Pamela Sissi Carroll put minds at ease as they break down the elements of teaching.

The 13 chapters cover every day issues ranging from proper classroom attire to the complexities of classroom management. The authors, professional teachers in their own right, each approach the issues differently. A veteran of teaching, Rychlik uses the Q&A format, where student teachers submit their classroom challenges, and based upon his wealth of experience, he provides them guidance. Teacher educator, Carroll, addresses the same issues from another angle, using more theory-based comments. Together, they both provide a refreshing anecdote to the quote on quote “to-do’s and not-to-do’s” of teaching because their approaches are not the typical, mechanical text book manual. Rather, their discussions are quite relatable and are easily understood by the newly admitted classroom student teacher.

Undoubtedly, the classroom will present many challenges for a teacher. In the book, these challenges seemingly range from simple to complex, offering strategies and solutions to various scenarios and to the specifics of teaching. I consider the simplistic challenges as being those where the authors provide a clear-cut approach on how to tackle the problem. Complex challenges are where the authors don’t provide a black and white answer, but rather, suggest that more attention need to be paid to the students and the circumstances surrounding them.

First-time teacher, Melanie, is faced with a series of problems. She looks as young as her high school students and is unsure of how to dress. She is also worried about how academically effective she is as a teacher. Melanie struggles with the concept of taking charge and being an authoritative figure. Rychlik says that it is important to always “Look like a professional, and act like one, too” (2). In all areas of teaching, it is important to be confident. And Carroll mentions that we are all “continual learners” and need to “shift from [the] student to teacher” mode (9). As this may be hard to do at first, it does hold promise that professionalism will eventually surface.

Laura is concerned that her curriculum is not culturally responsive. Addressing this issue, Rychlik
suggests that it is crucial that “the curriculum be a true reflection of our desire to reach [the students]” (48). He says that literature “should never be looked at as a black or white thing;” instead, teachers should see where their students interests lie and go from there (48).

Some of the more complex scenarios in the book deal with effective ways to teach grammar and writing, helping special needs students, and how to deal with behavior problems and at risk students. While at times Rychlik and Carroll offer different approaches on certain issues, it leaves room for the reader to decide which approach would be the most useful.

For Robin and Paul, and for many newcomers, teaching grammar and writing is never easy. Robin believes that teaching grammar from exercise books is ineffective and does not provide a link to literature and writing lessons. Paul worries that during writing workshops students are more engaged in casual conversations rather than their assignment. While Rychlik is adamant about staying away from isolated grammar books, Carroll says that for some, teaching straight from a grammar book is very effective. In the case for Paul, both Rychlik and Carroll agree that it is crucial to spend time with the students to discuss the elements of peer editing and writing. Rychlik encourages the use of checklists in peer editing groups. He says that they “provide structure and a road map to engage the editing process” (66). For examples, Rychlik offers a sample checklist that has been useful in his own classrooms.

Thankfully, the book touches on the needs of special education students. As classrooms are always intermixed with ESL (English as a Second Language) students, ESE (Exceptional Student Education) students and Special Education students, the care to reach them all is the most important concern.

Freddie is concerned that his master teacher doesn’t meet the needs of the students with learning disabilities. He feels that there is not enough time spent with the Special Education teachers and not enough modifications are being made to difficult lesson plans. Rychlik thinks that it is absurd and ironic that the regular classroom teachers “don’t seek out the Special Ed teachers for help” (113). Rychilk believes that the special education teachers are a great asset in the classroom. He suggests that general education teachers can learn a lot about their special needs students by spending time with Special Ed teachers. Carroll adds that because the needs of students with learning disabilities are so individualized, it is extremely important to engage with the Special Ed teachers and understand “what kinds of expectations we [can] set for students who are labeled” as such (126).

Behavior problems and at risk kids will always be an issue in the classroom. As classroom management is one of the most important tools to master as a teacher for a beginner, it reigns on them hard.

Shakia is a beginning student teacher. She is going into the profession with a strict mentality. When she noticed that two of her students had the same exact answers on a test, she immediately knew that there would be “hell to pay” for cheaters in her classroom (157). Rychlik doesn’t tell Shakia to lighten up, but instead, suggests that she have a private conference with each student about the consequences of cheating, but also to allow them to “reattack the assignment on their own terms in their own words” with a small penalty (157). Carroll notices that Shakia is not fully prepared for discipline and control in her classroom. She suggests that it is wise for all new teachers to review the three classroom discipline models—Lee and Marlene Canter’s Assertive Discipline, Thomas
Gordon’s Teacher Effectiveness Training, and William Glasser’s Choice Theory—and then decide which one will work best for each classroom.

Shari is particularly concerned with one of her at risk students who had spent time in jail and who is failing all his classes. She says she wants to teach and “help kids…with that kind of life” (175). Luckily, Rychilk has had experience working in a minimum security lockup facility for middle-aged school boys and reassured Shari that these “young fellows weren’t unteachable, and they weren’t unreachable” either (175). He says that all they really want is “to love and be loved” like everyone else (175). However, Carroll says that although we can still help these troubled kids, it may be harder said than done.

Rychlik and Carroll navigate through every possible scenario that new teachers face. They deal with minor issues to the more specific issues and to all problems across the board. New teachers desperately need help during their student teaching semesters, and until they get all their questions answered correctly, they will continue to struggle through a “zone of discomfort” for a long period of time (xiii). *13 Ways of Looking at Student Teaching* provides an easing backdrop to the issues new teachers face and it encourages all, that with time and practice, every new teacher will eventually achieve their comfort zone.
Can I Really Write?

Review of *Inside Out: Strategies For Teaching Writing*

Erika Diaz


Many believe that writing is only for those who are gifted and meant to write. Teachers and educators especially believe this because of how difficult it can be to get students to write, the solution to this is easy and it is found in the book *Inside Out Teaching Strategies for Writing* by Dan Kirby, Dawn Latta Kirby and Tom Liner. These authors put together this fabulous book that tells us students can indeed write, and it’s all in the approach that teachers and educators take when it comes to having students write. They tell us that “…we need to spend more time coaching students with their writing as we teach, and less time in full-frontal teaching.” (xi). Writing is not simply for the few and the gifted. The authors have 30 years of classroom experience and provide us with multiple effective, yet simple ideas for teaching and getting students to write. Teaching writing is not easy, the authors of *Inside Out* tell us that we must analyze our own personal beliefs about teaching writing, amend and revise if necessary, and use what we come up with in accordance to the students we teach.

This book is written for a wide variety of people, it’s for those who are new to the teaching field, and it’s for veteran teachers who are looking to liven up their classrooms, “It’s for the preservice teachers learning what this business of teaching writing is all about”(xii). *Inside Out* is an easy to read book, each chapter of the book includes teaching writing theories and ideas and that are easily understood and that can be used in classroom. The best part of it is that the strategies that are taught throughout the book are all hands on and engaging. The authors made sure to include step by step developmental writing strategies that you can use from day one of your class.

The different chapters of this book include titles like the following: The Classroom Environment, Writing about Poetry, The Writing Process, Grading and Evaluating and my personal favorite, The J. All of these chapters come with extensive and useful information.

In The Classroom Environment chapter the authors tell us how important the classroom environment is to writing, teachers should “let students know that writing is the primary business of your writing class.” (25) It helps to have poetry corners, a display of finished writing products, and even encouraging students to display drafts of their unfinished pieces. This helps the students to feel comfortable and confident in their writing, it also helps students to see that writing is developmental, and that the first piece isn’t always perfect. These are some of the few steps teachers, and educators must consider taking in order to create a positive writing environment for future writers. This well written chapter also provides ideas for the beginning of the year writing activities. This is also extremely helpful for first year teachers, like myself. There are over ten interactive and engaging “First Writing” ideas, some including titles like: Lie Game, Secret Telling,
Interview Poem, and Secret Box. These activities help to break the ice in the beginning of the year and can be used as an offspring to writing, and can help teachers create an idea of how much their students already know about writing. Most importantly, these activities aren’t limited to what the teacher asks the students to write about. The activities are about the students. This way the students aren’t stuck having to write about something they’re not interested in, it’s about what’s inside of them. This book also gives grace to the writing process. Sometimes it may be difficult to know how to have students begin to write, or how much time or emphasis to take with any given part of the writing process. Many teachers spend a lot of their time worrying about the correct topic to have students write about or they put an enormous amount of focus on editing. The important thing about writing is that it has to come from within us. Unfortunately teachers miss that simple fact. “We still believe that teaching writing involves helping our students attend to, collect, and select from that inner flow, and then to spin that language onto the page as text.” (12) We must let the writers (the students) have their own voice in their writing rather than imposing order on their word usage in their writing. As we all know, even professional writers know this, we begin to feel anxious and we worry about what we are going to compose even before it gets written as a first draft. We all feel this and it is no secret. This book tells us that this chaos is part of our natural flow. The authors make clear what this writing process is “When we teach writing as a process, we are trying to align our instruction with what “real” writers do when they write” It is helpful for students to know that this feeling of chaos is natural. “…we attempt to teach writing in more natural and less artificial ways…that often means getting out of the way of student writers to let them write.” (14) The writing process is simply a support system that allows the students to write through their inner flow. Finally, one of the chapters discusses the J. The J is the journal. This chapter tells us the pro’s and the cons of having students keep journals, it gives real responses from real teachers who’ve used the journal in their own classrooms. The chapter also gives us tips on how to maintain our classes writing in journals on a daily basis, without us having to stress out from keeping up with them.

All in all, the book Inside Out Strategies for Teaching Writing is an extremely resourceful book, it’s one that every educator, English teacher, aspiring English teacher, or even parent should have on their bookshelf. It’s full of writing resources and ideas that anyone can use, and the price is reasonable considering everything you get out of it!
Insights and Strategies That Work

Review of I Read It, But I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers

Liz Sterling


What an almost unexpected joy and relief it is to pick up a book published to help teachers of Language Arts that actually does what it purports to do – help!

Refreshingly, Tovani, although obviously herself a scholar, does not write for the readers of scholarly journals. She does not write in jargon, or in “theory-of-the-current-decade-speak.” She does not pontificate for fellow researchers as if at a symposium. No, Tovani has crafted an easy-to-read, how-to text for the real English teacher, the one with or without a Masters degree in Education or English, who is laboring in the trenches of America’s secondary schools. This is a book for the teacher trying to fight the good fight, the one who instinctively knows that many of today’s students need a different approach, an approach geared to their particular needs, if they are going to progress in school as well as in life in general.

Tovani recognizes that the key to both a student’s mastery of content knowledge in any discipline, and the successful navigation of an adult’s journey through the maze of modern life in an urbanized society, lies in reading comprehension. She also recognizes, both through the academic studies to which she alludes, as well as through her own experiential reference, that reading comprehension is the basic competency missing from the unsuccessful student’s skill set.

I Read It, But I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers goes beyond merely pointing out that unsuccessful students lack comprehension skills and admonishing teachers that they must teach them; it explains both the “whys” of missing competencies, and the “hows” of alleviating the problems.

One of the most effective strategies for teacher-use is the way the book itself is laid out. The Contents page clearly delineates the three sections of the text, “Setting The Stage,” “In Support of Strategic Reading,” and “Access Tools.” The chapters in the first two sections, while expository in nature, are varied in form. The variance adds to their usefulness and our understanding, as it includes charts, anecdotes, and suggestions. “Setting the Stage” is an extremely valuable section because it lets the teacher-reader know exactly what the comprehension problems are for struggling students, and how the students acquired them to begin with.

In a charmingly disarming fashion, Tovani lets us into her early life as a struggling reader, and shares with us her personal problems with reading. (In my sole criticism of this work, I wonder how such well-meaning and skilled parents as she describes managed to produce a kid with comprehension problems that were not pathological in origin.) She goes on to describe the means by which she solved her reading comprehension dilemmas, albeit later in life. It is some of those self-designed
strategies that Tovani brings to her own secondary reading workshop classes, classes designed specifically to aid struggling or “remedial” readers.

I Read It, But I Don’t Get It -Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers is itself a pleasure to read, in no small part because of the way Tovani invites us into her classroom and reviews with us that which has actually taken place with her students. It is as if we are right there observing in her class, and then listening to her share her reflections about the events later on, as if over a convivial cup of coffee and some cookies.

Tovani is truly a master of the “show, don’t tell” methodology of writing, as she includes copious snippets of dialogue among her students and herself to bring her points home. By using these bits of dialogue to elucidate such concepts as Fake Reading” (2), and “Connections” (71), along with myriad others, Tovani brings us, the teacher-readers, along with her and her students on a systematic journey of discovery. The discoveries she leads us to are what the problems are, in many cases how they originated, and how to solve them.

This author makes no bones about the fact that all her lesson plans did not work perfectly all along the way. She shows us the pitfalls; what didn’t work and how she realized it wasn’t working. (How she realized it wasn’t working was almost always learned through her students’ classroom comments and reactions.)

True, many of Tovani’s listed elements of comprehension improvement are not new – they are the stuff of Language Arts pedagogy dating back several decades, for example, “Fix It” Strategies such as making connections, making predictions, and rereading (51). The difference is that Tovani does not merely instruct teachers to instruct students to use these methods; she actually gives scenarios and explanations as to how to use them. In affect, she teaches us how to teach them, and she does it in such a way as to make the education utterly accessible.

In addition to the author’s explanations and elucidations, she provides a highly useful Appendix of sorts with sample templates that act as worksheets utilizing the various techniques. Teachers may adapt these for their own classes.

On a final note, I must say that it is somewhat difficult for those of us who have always been “good readers” to grasp the troubles many people have with reading. For those of us who learned to read and to love reading with no more difficulty than which we’d had learning to walk or to eat solid food, it is almost impossible to imagine how such is not the same for everyone. Unfortunately, perhaps many of us who are teachers fit more readily into the former category than the latter. That is why a book like this is so crucial for reaching today’s reluctant, resistant, and generally unsuccessful readers.
How to Cope with the Idea of Allowing One’s Students Choice in Learning

Jin Sook (Ellie) Hong


While trying out a new procedure called “Giving One’s Students Choices,” teachers have complained of the following symptoms: sweaty palms, nervous laughter, darting eyes, and ceaseless talking. As teachers, and adults, it can be frightening to think that we should consider giving our students choice on what they want to and need to learn. But that is precisely the case that the authors make in their book, “What Choice Do I Have?” Reading, Writing, and Speaking Activities to Empower Students, by Patrick Bigelow and Michael J. Vokoun. In fact, the authors emphasize the importance and need for teachers to offer choices to their students as an integral part of teaching students to truly own their education. The authors’ main argument is that if we as teachers give students choice regarding their language arts education – that is, what to read, what to write, and what to write - then we facilitate students’ abilities to empower themselves.

Although the ideal presented seems infeasible to some, the authors give precise directions on a multitude of activities that can guide teachers and students alike towards achieving the goal of having student-led learning.

The book is divided into six chapters: Chapter 1: “In Support of Choice”; Chapter 2: “Choice in Reading”; Chapter 3: “Choice in Vocabulary”; Chapter 4: “Choice in Writing”; Chapter 5: “Choice in Speaking”; Chapter 6: “Just One More Thing – An End with a Bang!” This paper will attempt to explain the authors’ message and intentions by chapter, ending with commentary on how the information from the book can aid teachers in practicing the art of giving students choices in their learning.

Chapter 1 begins with a thorough description of the word “ownership,” which pertains to the fact that when students are given a choice in their education, they feel like they own it, making them even more encouraged to learn (2). As a consequence, students become empowered, wanting to learn more at their command. However, the authors point out that giving choice does not mean to do so without structure or guidance. In fact, what the authors argue is that teachers offer reasoning for the activity that the class is to participate in, then allow students the choice in taking part of the activity in a way that feels safe, encouraging, and comfortable for the students. If students can have all that is described above, then they can feel that they are in control over their learning, which helps them make positive choices. Chapter 1 ends by highlighting the fact that giving students choice does not have to be as terrifying as it sounds; it means to give students some choice in how they learn and does not mean that a teacher relinquish control over the class and allow complete chaos to take over.

Chapter 2 begins to become more targeted in the approach to allowing students choice in their learning. Entitled, “Choice in Reading,” the authors get directly to the point and state that there are ways to give students a choice in what they read by offering a “reading contract,” where the student
and the teacher agree upon what the student chooses to read (10-11). The contract should be what the students want to read but also what the teacher thinks is appropriate for each student’s level. After a contract has been established, the teacher should set a time frame that is also tailored to each student’s level while making sure that students know exactly what the teacher expects, as far as reading assignments go, before the contract is finalized and copied for each party.

One example of a reading assignment, as described in the book, is a “Reading Memo,” which allows students to keep a log of what they have read and what their insights are reading the reading (15-16). A reading memo includes practice in heading, a summary of what the student has read, questions the reader has, a visualization of the reading, and an explanation of what the student has illustrated. Another example is the “Brain Drawing,” where the student draws a head, fills the brain part of the head with “symbols, words, images, phrases, or a combination of these” (23). Students then show their work to two or three other students, who sign the work viewed, giving ownership to each student. Lastly, students join the teacher for a class discussion of their own illustration and that of others they have viewed. Other examples of reading assignments include a “Mandala,” alternative book reports, “Six-Million-Dollar Testing,” and “People Fair” (29-66). Each reading assignment includes a description of the assignment; either of the authors’ experience with the assignment; a how-to section that takes the reader on a step-by-step direction as to how a teacher can recreate the assignment in his or her own classroom; a list of different ways that a teacher can choose to adapt the assignment; and a Question and Answer section that answers frequently asked questions. Teachers who have always struggled with inventing reading exercises that utilize multiple intelligences will find the chapter to be useful for everyday class activities. The authors do a precise and thorough job of explaining how any teacher can acquire the lessons necessary to engage students in enjoying reading.

Not unlike Chapter 2, Chapter 3, which is titled “Choice in Vocabulary,” gets to the point in describing a Vocabulary Contract that allows students a choice in how many vocabulary words and what level of difficulty the students would like to take on. In a vocabulary contract, the students also get the chance to choose which program the students will utilize in acquiring their list of approved vocabulary words. In how to make a vocabulary contract work, the authors suggest first setting a proper time frame, then making explicit the requirements and expectations of the vocabulary program. Also, teachers need to copy all the tests and quizzes, including a copy of the test and quiz dates in the contract. The authors suggest going over the expectations of the program frequently enough so that the students are reminded of the fact that they are responsible for what they have agreed to learn. The vocabulary section is highly helpful for teachers who know that students need to comprehend 95% of the words in a text to acquire meaning but cannot think of other ideas beside the word map exercise in teaching students vocabulary. Chapter 3 makes learning vocabulary pain-free and even enjoyable.

An example of a “program” that the student might choose from is called, “Visual Vocabulary Quiz,” where students fill each box - from the paper they have folded twice over – with illustration and words that correlate to the word they are to learn (76). Then, students show their work to other students who comment on the work. Again, the chapter is organized the same way as the previous chapter in that a description of the activity is followed by an account of
one of the authors’ personal experience, then a detailed how-to, a list of adaptations that a teacher
make, and finally a list of questions and answers.

Chapter 4, “Choice in Writing,” includes activities for choosing such as: “Life Map,” “Portfolio
Write-Up,” “The Definition Approach: Turning a Have To into a Want To,” “Scriptwriting,” and
“Chapbook Project” (82-119). All of the activities are tailored toward engaging students in writing,
whether it be about what they know or what they want to know, and offering students ownership
regarding their writing by showing them how to write for an audience they care about – their peers.
Chapter 5, “Choice in Speaking,” along with Chapter 4, follows the same format as the previous
chapters with activity’s description, author’s experience, a list of how-to, different ways to adapt the
activity, and a list of question and answers. Some of the activities delineated in Chapter 5 include:
“Identity Bag,” “Quick-Draw Public Speaking,” “Book Talk,” and “Poetry Coffehouse” (121-146).
Teachers may find using the two chapters in conjunction to be particularly useful in teaching
students the power of voice and the ability to convey that voice both in writing and in speech. In
fact, teachers can do a “Quick-Draw Public Speaking” regarding Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. then do
a “Life Map” regarding his autobiography to better understand where the person comes from and
how it shapes the things that he or she says and does.

The final chapter, Chapter 6, is entitled “Just One More Thing – An End with a Bang!” because the
authors believe students should end each assignments with a smaller assignment that offers them
the chance to reflect on what they have done with the reading of a book. The idea is useful in that
teachers typically find it difficult to leave time at the end of the period for summarizing an entire
period’s worth of reading in just a couple of minutes. But utilizing the activities in this chapter,
teachers will find that they can even make summarizing fun with the short and quick activities
included in this chapter. Included in the chapter, there are ninety-one different ways to respond to a
book, and examples include, “Write the story in the book from a different point of view,” “Write a
parody of the book,” and “Design the illustrations for the book” (153-159).

Unlike other books on education where the authors tell the audience how to teach students the
language arts, Vokoun and Bigelow’s book shows its audience how to teach. For example, the
authors include illustrations and written examples of the different activities that they discuss. Also,
the authors have made the book very user-friendly by offering clear organization on the different
concepts that resonate throughout the entire book. What I find particularly useful are the different
adaptations the reader can possibly take on the demonstrated activities, which give teachers a
choice, just as they are to give their own students a choice. Furthermore, the last list of 91 different
ways to respond to a book is highly useful and practical; any teacher can pick up one of the ideas
and utilize it in class as a complete activity on any given day, not just at the end of the day. Vokoun
and Bigelow’s book is useful for all teachers, and it is highly effective for teachers who require
practical advice that is both direct and explicit.
The Writing Teacher's Playbook

Review of *Teaching Adolescent Writers*

Erin Bach


I'm not one for sports analogies. It's a personal preference, I realize. To me, they generally come across as cliché and uninspired; I could do without them. But like I said, that's just me. Kelly Gallagher, author of *Teaching Adolescent Writers*, can't get enough of them. Whether he is discussing the “Friday Night Lights” motivational factor of audience, comparing end-only assessments to sucker punches, or simply stating that teachers need to coach their students, Gallagher infuses his book with sports analogies and references. And you know what? It doesn’t bother me a bit. Why? Because he knows what he’s talking about.

Kelly Gallagher (or Mr. G as his students lovingly call him) is exactly the type of teacher you hope and pray is in the classroom down the hall from you your first year of teaching. He’s been a full-time English teacher for over twenty years, he is the co-director of the South Basin Writing Project at California State University, Long Beach, and he’s authored three books on teaching. Sounds like a colleague you would go to for advice, no? Sadly, we can’t all be his coworkers, but with *Teaching Adolescent Writers* we can all benefit from his experience and wisdom in teaching our students what has been referred to as “the most complex of all human activities” (17).

What Gallagher does with his experience and wisdom is package it in a very clear and logical way. The book is neatly structured around six pillars of writing success:

1) Students need a lot more writing practice.

2) Students need teacher who model good writing.

3) Students need the opportunity to read and study other writers.

4) Students need choice when it comes to writing topics.

5) Students need to write for authentic purposes and for authentic audiences.

6) Students need meaningful feedback from both the teacher and their peers. (13)

These pillars are intended to “right the writing wrongs” that too many students are experiencing in middle and high schools across the country (13). Students aren’t getting enough time to write, aren’t shown decent examples of writing to model, aren’t given a say in deciding what to write, aren’t given opportunities to write for authentic audiences, and aren’t getting the kind of help and support they need from their teachers and peers. *Teaching Adolescent Writers* is a step toward a solution.
In Chapter 1, Gallagher states, "I have learned the hard way that before I teach my students how to be better writers, I must teach them why they need to be better writers (16; emphasis in the original). Let’s be honest, sometimes teachers need a bit of motivation too. So, following the same line of logic, before he shows us how we can make our students better writers, he addresses the reasons why we need to make them better writers. To start, he introduces us to the problems facing students today who are struggling to compete in a society where high levels of literacy are a requirement, and a failure to keep up will result in students “being trampled by today’s literacy stampede” (3). Knowing how to read and being able to write are essentials for students, all of whom will eventually be competing for jobs in an ever-expanding global marketplace. Simply put, “Today, writing is foundational for success” (4).

Once he has established why teaching writing skills is so crucial for our students’ real world success, Gallagher moves on to address how we might go about helping them acquire these skills. This guidance is found in Chapters 2-7, with each chapter addressing one of the six pillars for writing success. Inside each chapter are not only invaluable pearls of experienced teacher wisdom, but also classroom-tested strategies, personal anecdotes, and even work samples from his past students. We are shown ninth-grader Beatriz’s graphic organizer on “which animals played key roles in the liberties being lost [in Animal Farm]” along with twelfth-grader Jenny’s three-column purpose chart that examines a passage from 1984, and there are many more student examples just like these (56, 36). Seeing how real students responded to the activities allows us insight into student thinking and helps us gauge whether or not certain organizers will work for our own classes. An added bonus is that blank copies of all of the graphic organizers and revision/editing tools referred to within the chapters are conveniently located in the appendices. What more could an overworked, overstressed writing teacher ask for? How about writing schedules, strategies to improve on-demand writing performance, guides to writing rubrics, and transcripts of real conversations that Mr. G and his students have had? It’s all there.

In addition to being full of helpful tips, techniques, and tools, Teaching Adolescent Writers is also a pleasure to read. Gallagher writes clearly, concisely, and with a sense of humor that is a must when working with over 150 teenagers a day. One witty example is when he introduces a revision strategy he calls “Pimp My Write,” a clever take off on the MTV show “Primp My Ride” in which busted and broken-down cars are restored, revamped, and radically customized (58). He tells students that just as the show’s technicians replace the bumpers, fix the engines, and add flashy paint jobs to the old cars, they will be replacing boring words, fixing their grammar errors, and adding voice to their writing drafts. At the end of the show, the proud owner has a sparkling new version of his/her old car, and at the end of the revision process, the students will have a more vibrant and interesting version of their writing. I don’t know about you, but I certainly never had a teacher refer to an MTV show when discussing the writing process. His ability to relate to his students is just one more thing that adds to Gallagher’s likeable character.

Personal anecdotes, classroom transcripts, and a general tone of earnest affection for his students allow us to get to know Kelly Gallagher as a teacher and not just an author. Before even opening the book, I respected him for his twenty-plus years of experience in teaching high school—no easy feat to be sure. But upon closing the book at the end, I revered him for his dedication, optimism, and unyielding belief in his students. He has high aspirations, yet he is realistic in his
expectations. He knows that not every student will leave his class a master of the written word, and he accepts that. His central goal is simply this: “Everyone, regardless of ability, works toward the same goal: improvement” (143). His goal as a teacher is to make sure that he is doing everything he can to guide students in learning how to write, encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning, and supply them with the support they need for improvement.

As I stated before, I’m not one for sports analogies. But in honor of Kelly Gallagher, I’m going set aside my distaste and propose one of my own: reading *Teaching Adolescent Writers* is like reading the playbook of the coach of a championship team. Inside are all the strategies, plays, and tips you need to become a winning coach, too. Whether you’ve been teaching for twenty years or two, whether you think you’re an expert on teaching writing or you’ve never done it before, would you really turn down a chance to take a glimpse at the secrets of a pro? I didn’t think so. Treat yourself to *Teaching Adolescent Writers* and let Mr. G coach you in becoming a championship teacher.
THE UNBEARABLE TRITENESS OF BEING INAUTHENTIC

Zachary M. Medway

Tom Romano. *Crafting Authentic Voice*. Heinemann, 2004, 228 pgs. $22.50

I suppose I should give Mr. Romano credit for writing a book. After all, I've never written a book. But then, I've never written a bad book. Nor have I written a boring book. Nor have I written a very boring book that didn't need to be written.

Tom Romano wrote a very boring book titled *Crafting Authentic Voice*. Of the list of titles I had to choose from, this one appealed to me. I think I was struck by the word “authentic”. I want people to be more authentic. I want to be more authentic. I want my work to be more authentic. Choosing this book, I doomed myself to trudge through re-hashed pages of everyone’s thoughts about honesty and authenticity, everyone’s except the author.

Clearly the book was written for teachers and educators. It represents everything I can’t stand about academia – politeness, politics, pretentiousness, and probably a bunch of other p-words I don’t have the energy to muster.

I know Mr. Romano has a great reputation as a writing teacher. His students love him and he’s written many books about writing. *Crafting Authentic Voice*, however, is an exercise in not having anything to write about but writing about it anyway. I read Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* simultaneously with *Crafting Authentic Voice* to avoid depression.

And so, my fellow teachers, educators, readers, and writers, now that I've inspired you to pay $22.50 for this book, not including tax and shipping, let’s take a look at what makes it what it is – namely a compilation of other people’s books, poems, and quotes.

*Crafting Authentic Voice* focuses on expository writing. It’s divided into five parts:

- Part I: The Delight and Dilemma of Voice
- Part II: Qualities of Voice
- Part III: Trust the Gush
- Part IV: Crafting Authentic Voice
- Part V: Voice and Identity

Before I discuss the content, of which there is none, I’d like to mention something one of my writer friends told me…if you want to know how good a book is, all you need to do is read the first sentence:

Three rounds of antibiotics had failed to stop the cough that had been my companion more than a month (3).
This is one of many times Mr. Romano assaults me with his affected point of view. Let’s read about the wilder side of Mr. Romano:

The harmonica player took his turn. He curled his hands ‘round the instrument, playing right up against the mike, his breath doing the ferocious work of making music, keeping it going both on the exhale and the inhale. He wore sunglasses, but you knew his eyes were closed. (Page 19)

And the softer side of Mr. Romano:

Mariana and Jenny were living it up and I arose from bed to come to the kitchen to calm their mirth. (Page 37)

And the inspirational side of Mr. Romano:

I’ve sought to write this book in a voice that keeps you with me until the final word, which matters just as much as the first word and all the words in between. I’ve tried to create a voice so compelling that it might keep you awake some night longer than you intend. You can decide whether I’ve succeeded. I’ve enjoyed the work of writing. And it has been work, no question about it. But it was the sweet work of creating – work that both empties and replenishes mind and spirit. May Crafting Authentic Voice quicken your voice and the voices of your students. (Page 9)

All right! Uncle! Stop! I give! Please! No more! In his quest to try and create a compelling voice, Mr. Romano reeks of self-consciousness and sabotages any hope to be authentic. When you’re not giving yourself insulin shots from his prose, Mr. Romano takes every opportunity to pat himself on the back for his gifts as a teacher and writer:

“The voice is so authentic,” said Vicki.

The voice she was talking about was the voice in my second book, Writing with Passion (1995). We were using it as a text in a summer class I cotaught at the University of New Hampshire. (Page 125)

And if he isn’t referencing himself, Mr. Romano never misses an opportunity to include one of his own poems which I will spare you, but will direct to you page 70, Morning Coffee, page 85, The Day School Gives Out, and page 211, the teacher.

And if he isn’t busy referencing himself, Mr. Romano is about as modest as a stripper at a frat party:

I am a writer but I am not a writer first. I am a teacher first, a teacher who writes and teaches the craft of writing to others. I’ve done this since 1970. Even before then I was lured by words on paper. Though I don’t remember being read to as a child, I loved reading novels as a schoolboy. It naturally followed that in seventh grade during back-to-back, forty-five-minute study halls at the end of the day, a schoolmate and I began writing stories for each other’s reading pleasure.” (Page 7)
And if he isn’t busy using the first person I, Mr. Romano always finds time to be unoriginal. Pages 10 and 11 are comprised solely of other people’s writing quotes.

I’ve presented everything that is irritating about this book: saccharine tone, reference to other people’s work, and an ego-centric style that never misses an opportunity to drown in its own puddles of clichés. It feels like the HERMAN cartoon where the son tells his father, “They don’t give us time to learn anything in school; we have to listen to the teacher all day.” I never found an opportunity to learn anything from Mr. Romano. His book is a collection of ponderous anecdotes and recycled ideas that passes itself off as new. Here are the five parts of Crafting Authentic Voice and the books they draw from:

Part I: The Delight and Dilemma of Voice

What a Writer Needs, Pg. 5

The Mythology of Voice, Pg. 5

Coaching Writing: The Power of Guided Practice, Pg. 14

Voices on Voice, Pg. 16

Part II: Qualities of Voice

Writing: Teachers and Children at Work, Pg. 24

The Right to Write, Pg. 25

Coaching Writing, Pg. 29

Part III: Trust the Gush

Reshaping High School English, Pg. 62

The Lively Art of Writing, Pg. 65

An Alternative Style: Options in Composition, Pg. 78

Dancing with Words, Pg. 87

Writing with Passion, Pg. 87 (By the author)

Writing to Be Read, Pg. 114

Part IV: Crafting Authentic Voice

A Natural History of the Senses, Pg. 136

Bird by Bird, Pg. 166

On Writing Well, Pg. 193
Part V: Voice and Identity

In this 15 page section, the author references books we actually care about such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Scarlet Letter*.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Romano addresses the topic of *Crafting Authentic Voice* in Section IV titled *Crafting Authentic Voice*. The author does little more than restate the time old standards of showing rather than telling, using nouns and verbs, sensory description, appropriate use of adverbs, and how to construct metaphors. This section, the crux of his book, is a glorified exposition of grammar and literary terms. Mr. Romano reads like a one-note staccato ear-ache that bombards you with quotes, passages, poems, vignettes, references to other works, and shameless self-reference that destroys the feeling of anything authentic.

My parents raised me to believe that if you don’t have anything nice to say you shouldn’t say anything. It’s impossible for me to follow their lesson and write this review at the same time. So, what are the potential benefits of reading this book? *Crafting Authentic Voice* does provide teachers with exercises to help their students break out of the mold of acceptable academic expository writing, but these examples are presented like nutritional content labels you’d find on soup cans:

- Ask your students to take fifteen or twenty minutes to write rapidly, laying down words with candor and spice, writing with an edge, driving directly to the emotional center of something they care about with no holding back. (Page 90)
- Have students choose an important time and place...Ask them to list all the sensations they remember associated with it. (Page 139)
- Encourage students to make metaphors. Point them out in the literature you’re reading. Hold metaphor share sessions. (Page 177)

Mr. Romano uses many quotes and passages in his book, the most effective of which are from his students. Their voices are fresh, daring, and unapologetic. There was little in the book to suggest that Mr. Romano helped them achieve this authenticity. On the contrary, he appeared bewildered by their honesty.

The biggest benefit of reading this book, however, is that I sacrificed myself so you wouldn’t have to read it. I have read for your sins. I have spared you the agony of sitting down with another self-conscious, self-promoting, self-centered how-to book about writing. How can I support a book about authenticity and honesty which fails to lead by example? Mr. Romano says:

Because I was trying to tell the truth about things that mattered to me, I found that it was “almost impossible to be honest and boring at the same time” (Cameron 1998, 139). (Page 26)

If Mr. Romano wants to speak honestly, why does he quote somebody else? If you feel like you truly must read this book, you might benefit from finding out the kind of writing teacher you don’t want to become. If Mr. Romano hopes to gain my trust, he might start by looking in the dictionary:

*Authentic, adj. 1. Conforming to fact and therefore worthy of trust, reliance, or belief.*
2. Having a claimed and verifiable origin or authorship.

The world of academia has always been plagued by books like Crafting Authentic Voice – books that suffer from unoriginality and pompousness. There are many books that help teachers enjoy and understand the craft of writing. I have benefitted a great deal from Strunk and White’s Elements of Style, Natalie Goldberg’s Writing Down the Bones, and Stephen King’s On Writing. All of these writers had something worthwhile to say and expressed themselves clearly, effectively, and authentically. Mr. Romano said of himself, “At forty-two years old, I was no rookie to writing” (Page 13). The next time Mr. Romano decides to write a book, instead of asking whether his writing is authentic, why doesn’t he ask himself if he is authentic?

THE END…THANK GOD

Enter at your own risk…
A Ready-Made Tool Box

Review of In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning, Second Edition

Danny Stark
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Nancie Atwell, In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning, Second Edition


I entertained a recurring question as I read Nancie Atwell’s second edition of In the Middle: How has this woman eked out time to complete such a singularly comprehensive written resource for middle school reading and writing teachers while securing time for practicing what she preaches in the classroom, fulfilling her contract as wife and mother, and responding to the untold demands on her life created by her position as an important author and theorist in the field of adolescent education? David Ruenzel, book reviewer for “Teacher Magazine,” proclaims that Atwell’s first edition of In the Middle “. . . qualified as a cataclysmic event” in the discipline. Her method was widely adopted, and she became a sage of sorts for educators across the country seeking alternative methods for teaching and motivating students in reading and writing. To say the least, Nancie Atwell is an impressively
ambitious and creative educator, and she has dedicated her life to passing on to her students her knowledge of and love for language arts. She has made available to educators, through her professional publications, that same expertise and passion.

Her second edition of *In The Middle* is, indeed, exhaustive, a complete guide for teachers of middle school English. Her appendix section alone is worth the price of the book. Any English teacher, beginning or experienced, could take this text and use it exclusively as a blueprint to design and deliver a semester long course in the subject. With, from page one of the text, a picture succinctly planted in my head of a dynamic workshop opposed to a stodgy classroom, it kept occurring to me that *In the Middle* is like a ready-made tool box for middle school teachers of reading and writing. And, embellishing the simile, in that polished mahogany, leather-hinged and brass fitted box, along with many educational, entertaining, and aesthetically rewarding tools for teaching, can be found parchments containing nuggets of wisdom and poignant accounts of Atwell’s successes and failures with students, including samples of their work and hers. Good stuff, indeed.

Perhaps, though, the feature that most strongly draws me to this book is that it is a pure reflection of her honest quest to find the most effective possible method to teach this crucial
subject to young students. She has the integrity to reflect and improve on her methods for the sake of the discipline and the students she serves. She is willing to unabashedly—refreshingly unapologetic as she proceeds—admit that some of her earlier assumptions were erroneous to one degree or another. She simply went to work on improving as she learned during those fifteen years between additions, in the process, providing a perfect example of her belief in the teacher as co-learner.

Atwell refers to one important aspect of this change of approach to “Becoming a Teacher with a Capital T.” She explains, “This does not mean I’ve reverted to playing God and making all the writing decisions from behind my big desk.” She continues, “Just as there are times when kids need a mirror, someone to reflect back their writing to them, there are times when they need an adult who will tell them what to do next or how to do it. Bottom line, what they need is a teacher.” While teaching all those years, she was attending a private school of her own, the school of hard knocks, informing her that total freedom in the classroom, though preferred, is not always feasible.

In this vein, she relates her experience in receiving responses from various teachers who tried her approach outlined in the first addition. “I also encountered teachers from across the country with problems I had never come up against, from a
teacher in a budget-strapped urban setting trying to teach writing to thirty-five students at a time, six periods a day, to a teacher so upset that In the Middle ‘didn’t work’ in her classroom that she sent me four pages of questions she wanted answers to by Monday.” She is clearly open to considering and embracing the concerns other English teachers express about their application of her methodology in their specific circumstances. She wants to find solutions for all teachers and students of reading and writing. There is something about the way she presents her ideas that instills faith in me. My instincts tell me to trust this educator’s motives.

Some of the more frequent annotations I made as I read In the Middle were variations on the theme of how I would love to have students like the ones she used as examples. Not all students would be as malleable or receptive to the workshop concept. Although the traditionalist and skeptic in me keeps whispering that many classrooms, in more dismal settings, are not suited to any form of free-learning environment, the writer in me, the lover of reading, my aesthetic soul rises and convinces me that giving her workshop model a good go under any circumstances would prove productive. It would not be easy, and the resultant plan may faintly resemble the model Atwell created, but I can’t help but feel that with some creative
adaptation and considerable tweaking the academic freeing-up of underachieving students could be achieved.

At times, Atwell seems to be adapting on her feet, changing procedure, altering her approach, creating on the run. The work becomes a chronicle of experimentation, with students as test subjects. One might ask what becomes of the students who are, in a sense, guinea pigs for her classroom application of theory, but that concern loses traction when one considers the overwhelming positive effect even a flawed version of her system could have on students. Too many classrooms are textbook bound, dogma imbued, and teacher neglected. Students often receive minimal or no intellectual growth; they move on, having learned little or nothing. Atwell’s propensity for passion and devotion will outweigh many missteps she may take along the way. Additionally, she proves to be an adroit classroom tactician. She is gifted with keen insight into the adolescent mind and provides, throughout the text, insightful descriptions of their propensities.

Finally, and perhaps most valuable, is Atwell’s ability to enable her students. She promises them that they can, and, if they apply themselves, will. She implants the idea that they are already readers and writers, and that they are all capable of honing those skills. She offers them consistent opportunity and
motivation to take the tools she provides in the workshops and put them to good use in preparing for literate lives in an increasingly complex and demanding world.
Evoking Literary Meaning in the Workshop

Review of *The Literature Workshop, Teaching Texts and Their Readers*

Philip Steinman
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Sheridan D. Blau: *The Literature Workshop Teaching Texts and Their Readers*

The intellectual work the teacher does too often predetermines what the students can and will learn by limiting students to the teacher’s perspective. The traditional experience of being taught in the classroom is passive, a mere witnessing of the teacher lecturing, whereas the experience of learning for oneself is active. To make students active learners in the classroom the author Blau makes an epiphany early in his career that teachers need to switch roles with their students and have them take responsibility for the task of interpreting the text, including all the surrounding conceptual work. Blau dedicates his career to developing this approach in the classroom by creating a set of practical strategies with which to engage students in literature workshops. This book is the interesting result of Blau’s fieldwork and offers secondary school English teachers many useful approaches to teaching literature in today’s classrooms.

Blau illuminates that literature is unique because one does not read it for the information it contains like a news story in a newspaper but for the experience one has in reading it. The problem in the traditional classroom is that students are predominately tested on literature as if they read it for information. They are trained to regurgitate answers to questions such as, “What happens when character X does ABC..?” Blau’s workshop approach to literature addresses this fundamental problem by pushing students to read for aesthetic reading rather than efferent reading. The book is organized into chapters that are dedicated to the different workshop approaches that teach these very techniques.
One of the most interesting chapters, *What's Worth Saying About a Literary Text?*, scaffolds student reading so that students will be able to learn how to find and choose a topic to write on for oneself. The activities of this particular workshop include:

1. Reading a short story silently (5 minutes);
2. Jump-in reading, a re-reading of the same story where students read paragraphs out loud by randomly jumping in on their own until the reading is finished (6 minutes);
3. Pointing, where students simply call aloud lines or phrases from the text that moved them (5 minutes);
4. Writing About a Line, where students select the line(s) from the story they find most interesting or puzzling and write about them (10 minutes);
5. Sharing in Writing Groups, where students form groups of 3 and read what they actually wrote to each other (10 minutes);
6. Reporting Out and Publishing, where students volunteer themselves or a neighbor to read what they wrote (12 minutes); and
7. Extending the Workshop from Practice to Theory (10-30 minutes), where the teacher collects the students perspectives and casually links them to existing theoretical perspectives with examples such as 1) a Freudian reading; 2) a feminist reading; 3) a language analysis perspective; 4) psychological and ethical perspective; 5) a family dynamics perspective; and 6) the male-parental phenomenological perspective.

Blau connects some of the student readings to these academic approaches and teaches the students that their very own readings are likely to be of interest and value to other readers. Blau places all these student perspectives on the board to validate the students reading as productive. He illustrates that the students have created an excellent platform to launch their own writing of these essay topics from their “quick drafts” done in the class workshop. The individual steps in this workshop approach each have practical teaching merits: the oral reading shows students how to read and pronounce many of the words. As a second reading it also offers students the chance to read more profitably. Allowing students to jump-in relieves them of the stress of who will read next. Pointing to lines honors every individual aesthetic response to the reading and to keep it spontaneous Blau
requires no initial explanations for the student’s choices. Writing about a line gives students the opportunity to pick their own topic instead of being assigned one. The author assigns as homework for students to “Identify a line or a passage they don’t understand and write about that, inquiring into how and why these lines are so problematic and possibly exploring some plausible solutions” (147). The workshop approach in this chapter serves as just one practical example of many that will inspire teachers to push their students toward an aesthetic reading.

The book progresses section by section, as illustrated above in *What’s Worth Saying About a Literary Text?*, where students learn the section of how to talk and write about literature. It proceeds to a section with chapters that teach how to generate meaningful writing assignments, and finally to a section that teaches the foundations of literary knowledge with chapters that show students how to honor readers and respecting texts, and finally, to what students need to learn to demonstrate literary competence. Blau is particularly poignant in his writing assignments section, where his use of student’s journal or log entries enlivens the class. He asks all of his students to make extensive journal entries on what they read throughout the week. He collects the journals and dedicates a full day of class time once a week to selectively read aloud the sections of his student’s work that best illuminate the literature and raise critical issues. Students take pride in having their work read, and there is no need for factual based quizzes. Blau shows in the next chapter how these journals of student produced knowledge can be developed into quality research papers of literary criticism. He focuses on the classroom as the academic community to which the students belong which inspires the students to make quality journal contributions so that the class forms a collective expertise. His writing assignments progress from student peer review of first drafts to rewrites in which students have to draw upon papers written by their colleagues “to support, clarify, or stand in contrast,” to their own ideas. He even allows students to sometimes abandon the traditional thesis-argument essay format if “it might be more critically useful to open up additional possibilities for reading a text than closing down any one of them” (180). The reader gets the sense that Blau’s workshop approach to literature will often create multiple student perspectives that are richly developed and this must often be the case.
Throughout *The Literature Workshop* Blau offers many fascinating ways such as this to validate the students own experiences with literature. Some teachers may, however, find that the examples and direct lessons the author uses are not always directly transferable to the secondary school classroom. For example, the material he selects in some cases is for older college students (age 19+) because of the sexual content that would not be appropriate to discuss in high schools. Secondary school teachers may have difficulty in treating each student’s reading as a kind of theoretical perspective rather than an individual response, and therefore, decide to omit this activity, or reformat it for use at the end of the lesson. Despite these adjustments, Blau’s ideas and methods are applicable to secondary schools once teachers select their own text and apply them to their grade level with an appropriate sophistication assessment of their students. The workshops, whether entirely adhered to or not, are nevertheless wonderful approaches to teaching that will foster a sense of literary understanding by students. The uniqueness of this book is that the teacher uses the students’ experiences with their generalizations, practical wisdoms, and perspectives. Through workshopping, the teacher qualifies these experiences as a valid lens through which to interrogate a literary text. It is a decidedly empowering classroom approach for both teachers and students.
As a high school student, I rarely enjoyed the literature assigned by my teachers. I often felt lost, mainly because we were told to read a chapter for homework and be ready for either a quiz or comprehension questions on a worksheet. Reflecting back, I now realize that I felt no connection with the literature, and my teachers did little to make the literature relevant or engaging. In my college career, I have found that I have come to truly enjoy reading all genres of literature, in spite of my high school teachers’ efforts. Robert Probst wrote Response & Analysis in an attempt to rectify the perception of what it means to be an effective teacher of English in a secondary school.

Probst opens the book with an anecdote describing an encounter with a colleague who exclaims, “I only read trash, and it’s because of what you guys did to me when I was in high school” (Probst 1). Probst quickly realizes that, since he teaches Secondary English Methods classes, he is being blamed for the fact that many high school students tend to not enjoy the literature as much as their teachers. This run-in forms the basis for Probst’s book, in which he attempts to explain how each aspect of
reading literature can be student-centered, thus enhancing the text’s significance to the reader.

Probst denounces previous models for reading and making interpretations, such as New Critical theory. The New Critics claim that any piece of literature contains within it one central meaning, and it is the reader’s job to locate and identify that meaning. Probst believes that many teachers of previous generations relied too heavily on New Critical Theory, and thus students either find the one true meaning of a piece of literature on their own, or are forced to accept the meaning the teacher pronounced. On the other hand, Probst relies heavily on Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, and strays from earlier models like the New Critical Theory. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory portrays the reader-literature relationship as an individual experience, one that can change from person to person. This is crucial to Probst’s writing, because he believes that a New Critical approach “steals the literary experience from students” (5).

To achieve his goal, he presents nine chapters; each chapter is devoted to an aspect of teaching literature.

Each chapter of *Response & Analysis* is devoted to a principle of teaching literature that Probst advances about how Literature should be taught. Unlike many other books written about educational theory, Probst goes beyond the theoretical realm and provides practical classroom strategies with lessons and texts to accompany them. In the first 3 chapters of the book, Probst focuses primarily on the reader and how the reader approaches a text, calling it the ‘essential experience with literature,” (117) but
gives little attention to the importance of knowledge about the literature itself. This approach is key to Probst’s argument that each student must have an individual experience with the text.

Chapter 5, which is entitled “The Nature of the Genres” attempts to address issues with how readers approach a text based on the genre in which it was written. In this chapter Probst examines the major genres of literature. With each section, short stories, the novel, and poetry, Probst examines the important elements particular to the genre. He includes interesting examples of texts and lessons that accompany them. Unfortunately for freshmen and sophomore English teachers, these lessons appear better suited for higher level readers. In his discussion of poetry, perhaps one of the most difficult genres for students to appreciate or enjoy, Probst discusses the various aspects that can prove to be difficult for many students to overcome. For example, Probst believes the most difficult aspect of poetry is compression, stating that poems are “typically compact, each word carrying a heavy burden” (119). In fact, Probst goes on to say that many of the expectations that we place on students in their writing, which include clarity, grammar, and punctuation, are often flouted by poets. Again, this poses a problem for students, who read poetry and are often confused after the first line.

Response & Analysis is a great tool for any English teacher who seeks realistic solutions to many of the problems they face when teaching literature. In addition to his useful theories and examples, his book is very readable and engaging. This book
would make many teachers’ lives easier because it allows teachers to see that every reader can understand and even learn to enjoy reading.