When I was a graduate student at the University of New Hampshire, my reading and writing seminar teacher warned of the danger of becoming too "in house" as we read professional literature. I tapped my fingers impatiently. I had become passionate about teaching literacy because of such "in house" reading. I wasn't about to give it up. I wouldn't have applied to graduate school had it not been for the voices of Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and, for that matter, my seminar teacher, the very scholar who sat before me, speaking again: "It's easy to become comfortable in your own backyard," said Don Graves. "You need to stretch and examine how others approach reading and writing instruction."

I rolled my eyes. A few months earlier I'd read George Hillocks Jr.'s Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching (1986, Urbana, IL: NCTE). I'd learned a lot, but had also gotten angry. Hillocks attached the adjective natural to the process mode of teaching writing. I took umbrage. Natural seemed a rhetorical cheap shot that trivialized the pedagogy of writing process teachers. I rebelled and, consequently, resisted what Hillocks said in that book about his "environmental" mode of teaching writing.

So as I read the author's new book about written instruction at the secondary and college freshman levels, Teaching Writing As Reflective Practice, I was prepared to take arms, but I couldn't. Hillocks offers an olive branch to writing process teachers and qualitative researchers. In his own way he is saying, "Peace, brothers and sisters."

One major goal of this book is to provide a basis for integrating these diverse theories so that both the theories and their integrations have generative power. (39)

Teaching Writing As Reflective Practice arises from Hillocks' wide reading in psychology, classical rhetoric, and writing research. It arises from deep reflection. It arises from hard work with students (for the last 15 years, Hillocks and his M.A.T. students at the University of Chicago have taught writing to 7th and 8th graders in urban classrooms) and thorough analysis of the writing they produced.

INQUIRY AND DEVELOPMENT

The heart of writing in any genre is inquiry. Inquiry, Hillocks maintains, "is often responsible for the impulse to write. We do not sit down to write an essay, we sit down to write an essay about a particular subject" (99).

Fun is important to Hillocks' pedagogy, though not the kind students might find at a rock concert.
Hillocks seeks to involve students in the fun that comes with engaging in intellectual activities that are within reach yet challenging, activities so absorbing that people do them without extrinsic reward. He writes:

[Real teaching is . . . about . . . helping students learn to enjoy the process of thinking through complex problems because that gives them the power and the confidence to undertake new problems in new situations without the structure of the classroom environments. (75)]

Engagement is key. There is no learning without doing. It is the teacher's responsibility for ensuring that students become actively engaged. Planning is the “art” of teaching so important that Hillocks devotes 4 of 11 chapters to it. “[T]he goal of planning,” he writes, “will be to invent materials and activities that will engage students in using specific processes and strategies relevant to particular writing tasks” (123).

The teacher accomplishes this by designing “gateway activities” that “involve students in appropriate strategies of inquiry and ways of generating discourse features” (149).

THE ENVIRONMENTAL MODE OF TEACHING WRITING

Teaching Writing As Reflective Practice is not about teaching skills of punctuation, spelling, usage, grammar, or semantics, though such topics, Hillocks acknowledges, are important parts of any writing program. He works with various modes of writing, including empathic personal narratives—a mode that many teachers think students should outgrow. Hillocks argues that such narratives should be “included in every level of curriculum” (129), not only because “narrative is the key structure in almost every sort of writing,” but because “story-telling fosters the soul [and] has the potential for meeting the important goals of self-discovery and personal growth” (127).

But Hillocks isn’t interested in prescribing a writing curriculum. He knows that teachers “who plan their own curricula are more likely to be reflective about them” (187). And that’s what he’s after—reflective practitioners. A uniform writing curriculum makes innovation difficult. It wouldn’t make sense to move teachers toward reflective practice, then place them in a straitjacket of a curriculum with no room to roll their shoulders.

Hillocks is, however, interested in prescribing his environmental mode of writing instruction. I must admit that I was humbled by the meticulous planning of gateway activities that students engage in before ever drafting a word. I thought of the times I had introduced difficult genres to students and merely read them a few examples of them, then turned them loose to write. Some students flourished; some foundered.

Although we engaged in drafting, conferencing, and revising over several days, I was dangerously close to a mode of teaching that Hillocks thoroughly denounces: the “presentational,” which is represented by “teaching as telling”: the teacher lectures about a particular mode of discourse, assigns a paper, then grades the product. I enjoyed Hillocks’ castigation of the presentational mode of writing instruction.

UNJUST DISTORTIONS

I did not, however, enjoy Hillocks’ gratuitous swipes at process-oriented teachers. Gratuitous, I say, and utterly confounding, considering the olive branch I think he is extending to the process camp with this book. In one section, for example, Hillocks discusses various methods that teachers use to encourage imagination in students. He lists a number of strategies, then writes:

All these involve imaginative leaps, but they also involve considerable preparation. Simply listening to music or sitting in a tent holding hands with classmates is unlikely to provide the basis for imaginative insight. (106)

Who is he referring to? Not presentational teachers surely. His target must be natural process teachers who have been accused of being cuddly and affective to a fault. What Hillocks is really upset with here, I think, is not a particular research camp or mode of instruction. His disdain is for any teaching that is unreflective and directionless.

In another part of Teaching Writing, Hillocks uses an incident from his own life to illustrate how he learned an important process:

Consider learning how to use the clutch on a standard transmission. My dad’s explanation, by itself, would have done little good. His explanation, combined with my trying (and stalling the car fairly frequently) and his coaching, finally did the trick by the end of our second session. On the other hand, had he simply demonstrated, I would have been in trouble. It would have taken a long time to perceive exactly what the relationship of the pedals had to be. (122)

Hillocks metaphorically refers to the three modes of instruction here: mere “explanation” from Dad is the “presentational”—teaching as telling that values declarative knowledge. The actual driving combined with Dad’s coaching—the strategy that engenders real learning—is the “environmental.” And then Hillocks takes yet another swipe at process teachers by saying that if he had been provided only with a demonstration, he would have taken a lot longer to learn how to drive a car with a stick shift.

Writing process teachers have spoken often about how important it is for writing teachers to write. They become mentors for student apprentices. Teachers are a daily example in the classroom of an adult who writes for real purposes. Students see those mentors demon-
strate the process of writing. But no good writing process teachers I know personally or have observed have ever stated or implied that mentors need only demonstrate how writing gets done.

Process teachers are proactive. They engage students in lots of writing; they provide direct instruction through mini-lessons; they explicitly connect processes of reading and writing; they nudge students to try new genres and new writing strategies; because they write, they have a practitioner's understanding of the craft; most important, they move students to reflect on their writing processes and evolving products. They encourage students to think of themselves as writers, not just competent students who can complete writing assignments successfully. Good writing process teachers are right in there—mid-process—when drafting and revising are taking place, working in students' zones of proximal development. It is hard, responsible work they are doing, worthy of respect.

Thus, the image of natural process teachers that Hillocks creates and punches is a straw one. It doesn't ring true. I have been in plenty of classrooms, too, spent 17 years in my own, in fact, teaching teenagers to write. My own inquiry reveals that in good writing process classrooms, students have not been holding hands, and teachers have not been merely demonstrating how to write without interacting with students. It is no fairer for Hillocks to characterize writing process teachers as unreflective and irresponsible than it is for writing process teachers to characterize George Hillocks, Jr., as clinical and bloodless.

If we are to integrate the various theories of teaching writing, as Hillocks proposes early in the book, we must have dialogue among the various camps. Creating stereotypes and distortions makes it all too easy to dismiss those unlike us. We must seek out the best in each other to see what we can learn. In Teaching Writing As Reflective Practice Hillocks presents the best of the environmental mode of teaching writing. That needs to be combined with the best in the process mode of teaching writing, and, in fact, with the best in the presentational, too. "Teaching as telling," I must admit, can sometimes be dramatic and profound.

VERISIMILITUDE AND ONE GAP

The important work that Hillocks describes—the carefully sequenced gateway activities—takes place before students ever put pen to paper or have located topics to write about. Late in the book, Hillocks provides the classroom drama of implementing gateway activities. These accounts of Hillocks in the act of teaching and reflecting are compelling and informative. The teaching and learning are roughhewn and unpolished, sometimes volatile, given the dynamics of one particular class that contained “six behavior-disordered” students. These undoctored, reflective narratives are welcome reading in our profession. We read so much that makes us think, “Oh, I could never teach that well.” We recognize the classroom scenes that Hillocks describes, classrooms in which many of the kids are excelling and some of the kids are, in Hillocks' word, “obstreperous.”

Hillocks discusses the gains made by Verita and Maurice, two students who have long roads to travel in their ever evolving linguistic growth. He reflects on their journey and the gateway activities that made it possible:

Imagine how Maurice and Verita would fare if the stated goals remained abstract, rather than made concrete through specific activities, examples, various indications from their teachers, and eventually their own writing. (144)

When I read that, I wanted to add, "Imagine how Maurice and Verita would fare if they had produc-

CONCLUSION

Teaching Writing As Reflective Practice will not necessarily be easy reading for teachers. Hillocks is thorough in explaining the theoretical underpinnings of his practice. Although the book contains a number of affecting stories, his prose is scholarly rather than journalistic, a style and tone that one of my graduate students said would be convincing and respected by many administrators, not an unimportant quality when teachers are trying to revise writing curricula.

And I must add this: The book caused my graduate students and me to reflect more deeply than the two previous books we had read, books that come out of the natural process camp. Hillocks sparked debate in our classroom community. We stretched to articulate understanding. We evolved our theoretical positions amid talk and writing. Hillocks' book will be an important one to all those in the profession concerned with reflective practice in the teaching of writing.