As it is with many teachers of writing that I know, I am drawn to the titles of books, particularly those that I think will help me improve myself as an educator and a human being. It may reveal my shallow side, but for me, title is everything, which explains why I gravitated toward Strategies for Struggling Writers by James L. Collins. The opportunity to increase my repertoire of tactics for teaching writing, particularly with the students for whom writing is a chore, was strong and inviting. Indeed, had the title omitted the word "strategies," I would have most likely relegated it to the bottom half of my reading pile. Instead, I opened it with the anticipation of learning something new, or at least of gaining a greater appreciation for what I already do right. In Collins' book, I felt I got a little of both.

He believes that the recent shift to a writing workshop approach in the classroom has not helped struggling writers because they lack the primary foundation that would allow them to take advantage of this learning environment. Collins begins his 244 pages with a cursory review of writing instruction, tracing the change of emphasis from the teaching of skills to process-based instructional methods. He believes that the recent shift to a writing workshop approach in the classroom has not helped struggling writers because they lack the primary foundation that would allow them to take advantage of this learning environment. In fact, Collins thinks that the process model, with its belief in pulling latent writing abilities out of students, assumes that writing is an acquired proficiency rather than a learned one, and that for struggling writers this is a problem. The way to help these students in a workshop atmosphere is through "strategic writing instruction," a term coined by Collins to describe a method for allowing teachers "to think strategically about writing and the teaching of writing so that they can help writers identify and use strategies to control their own writing skills and writing processes" (p. viii). Success for struggling writers, Collins asserts, depends on instructional intervention. What is important in this methodology, and what Collins stresses throughout the book, is that teachers work with students to tap into what they already know and then help students to "co-construct" an understanding of writing through their participation in community with other writers. This subtle yet striking difference in the way teachers work with struggling writers is what makes strategic writing instruction a success. It is not a formulaic structure which gives students strategies to help them develop, but rather it is a building process which allows teachers to individualize instruction in order to help these writers make their own connections. Certainly, the examples used throughout the book illustrate what can be achieved when teachers rely on their own understanding of writing and students, rather than depend on workbooks or an instructor's manual.

It is obvious that Collins has spent a great deal of time thinking about struggling writers. Through his research he has discovered that these students, often labeled as lazy or weak writers, have "the same difficulties as the rest of us when we are faced with challenging writing tasks; the only major differences are that they encounter difficulties more often and have fewer options for overcoming them" (p. 132). According to Collins, struggling writers tend to rely on a series of default strategies that keep them from growing and developing their writing skills. In fact, Collins devotes an entire chapter to three main default strategies—copying, visualizing, and narrating—that struggling writers use consistently, and he provides a way through strategic writing instruction to build on, not replace, these methods in order to help students progress. Basically, this approach involves four steps: "1) identifying a strategy worth teaching, 2)
introducing the strategy by modeling it, 3) helping students to try the strategy out with workshop-style teacher guidance, and 4) helping students work toward independent mastery of the strategy through repeated practice and reinforce-
ment” (p. 65). Therefore, the role of the teacher throughout this process is to help students discover what works for them. The key is to reach the students in such a way that they begin to develop other options rather than continue to rely on default strategies that keep them stuck.

Reading this book I found myself nodding in affirmation. The theoretical framework Collins presents makes sense, particularly for many teachers like myself who are immersed daily in researching and under-
standing writing theory and practice. In fact, it seems obvious that teachers who are researchers in their own classrooms know how to help struggling writers; it is inherent in their nature to act as coach, guide, and “co-structor.” The problem appears to be with teachers who have only a basic understanding of process writing and feel that the best way to teach writing is through formulaic strategies that they have gleaned from other sources. This is where Collins’ book can be most helpful. Inexperienced teachers will come to understand what struggling writers go through and how they might intervene to help them find appropriate ways of learning. Experienced teachers, the ones who have spent and will continue to spend a great deal of time thinking about students and means for connecting with them, will benefit from this book as well by discovering additional ideas for tapping into how struggling writers see and understand language. However, both novice and veteran teachers of writing will find that the book does not present an inventory of strategies for intervention, even though this is implied in the title. Rather Collins states in his closing chapter, “Identifying strategies — beyond those that I’ve used to illustrate my main points — I leave to my readers” (p. 213).

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**Review: Learning by Heart**

—continued from p. 34

By inviting us to remember our own and to envision others’ experiences of school, *Learning by Heart* also provokes us to imagine how school might be different. The editors intend that the book will find its way into schools and especially into teacher preparation classes. I hope it does. If poems can be an instrument for what Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh calls “deep looking,” shouldn’t they be more a part of the curriculum than they are now?

For the same reason, could poetry not also be a form of teacher inquiry, combining as it does close observation and the shaping power of language? As William Carlos Williams told Robert Coles when they visited New Jersey schools where Dr. Williams was the physician, “There’s a poem a minute taking place in those classrooms.” If so, teachers should be writing more of them.

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