Teaching Reading in Middle School: A Strategic Approach to Teaching Reading That Improves Comprehension and Thinking


I admit that I picked up Laura Robb's book, Teaching Reading in Middle School: A Strategic Approach to Teaching Reading That Improves Comprehension and Thinking, with some reluctance. I'm not a middle school teacher. But as my students are working in middle school classrooms and we seem to have a number of middle school teachers working with us at our writing project site, I thought it was time to delve, again, into the mysteries of middle school. And, with the statewide emphasis on reading, it was also time to renew the connection between reading and writing. I'd worked with reading before, but that was when I was in graduate school. As a writing teacher, I cannot escape reading; I study reading to find ways to enhance my students' writing.

So, I plunged into Robb's book and was immediately enchanted. Her introduction unabashedly argues that middle school is the perfect teaching level—"a time of significant academic, emotional, and social growth" (8). She argues that excellent middle school teaching requires actively involved students and topics relevant to the students' lives. Before I'd finished with the introduction, I was agreeing, adding a single caveat—that whether you're teaching at the elementary, middle school, or high school level, good teaching always involves students actively and is always relevant. Despite the caveat, because Robb began her book with what I believed, I immediately decided this book wasn't going to be as much of a chore as I'd anticipated.

The more I read of Teaching Reading in Middle School, the more I realized how much Robb's thinking meshes with National Writing Project (NWP) philosophies and approaches to teaching, with which I, as director of a writing project site, am very familiar. Robb believes a productive reading program "considers and makes use of research in these areas: 1) strategic reading; 2) motivation and involvement; 3) a workshop environment" (13). Strategic reading, I learned, requires discovering students' reading processes, modeling strategies, and helping students to internalize these strategies. Teachers teaching teachers, the tagline of NWP, is modeling. Our demonstration lessons are modeling activities. We use workshops all summer long, in continuity meetings, and in various activities not connected with the summer institute. And, beyond that, our teacher-consultants promote workshops—not because of any one theory, but because when they're done right, workshops help improve writing. As close as Robb's ideas are to NWP beliefs and activities, I wouldn't be a bit surprised to learn she is a teacher-consultant with a writing project. I hope she is.

Robb puts forth nine key reading strategies: activate prior knowledge; decide what's important in a text; synthesize information; draw inferences during and after reading; self-monitor comprehension; repair faulty comprehension; ask questions; build vocabulary; and develop fluency. With few adjustments, these could be nine key strategies for writers as well. Robb's book reminds me of the need
for writing teachers to understand the strategies for helping students improve in reading. Reading and writing are inextricably intertwined.

Robb’s eleven chapters help teachers with researching; organizing reading workshops; understanding strategic reading; discovering what students know about reading; preparing strategy lessons to help students learn to read; modeling: connecting books and students; organizing strategic reading groups; cross-grading projects; and assessing, interpreting, and evaluating. Each chapter includes solid research that’s well documented and well explained. Call-out boxes highlight the applications of research in everyday classrooms. Chapters are peppered with samples from Robb’s classroom, sample handouts, schedules, lesson plans, lists of ideas, lists of strategies, guidelines, and hints. At the end of each chapter, Robb challenges readers to pause and reflect about their own reading programs and the issues she’s just raised.

Teaching Reading in Middle School is an easy-to-read, solidly grounded book, and—most importantly—it is practical for classroom teachers. All of Robb’s handouts and materials are provided in appendices for the classroom teacher to reproduce. It’s a book I envision teachers pulling from the shelf and using over and over again. The downside, if there is one to this book, is that Robb doesn’t give as much emphasis to writing as I’d like to see. Okay, I’m a writing project director, and I love writing as much as Robb loves reading; I’m prejudiced about it. Still, I’d like to see her put more emphasis on the writing component of her reading-writing workshop. To be fair, Robb does have students writing a good bit—they write “all about me” letters, fast writes, literature response journals, observation notes, story-specific questions, “what’s hard? what’s easy?” reflections, debriefings, and even minilessons. It’s clear to me that she integrates reading and writing. What isn’t clear is how Robb would go about helping other teachers integrate the two subjects.

Robb’s book is one I’ve ordered for our summer institute library; I’m going to encourage our middle school fellows to try it out, and I’m going to use pieces of it in various activities this summer. I’m also going to use it with my preservice teachers. They need to hear this voice of experience and practicality as they prepare to teach.

I strongly recommend this book because of its practical applications of theory but also because of the thoughts and questions it raises, not all of them new by any means. For example, if students aren’t reading at grade level, they can’t be writing at grade level. It seems to me that we have to adjust our teaching and our assess-

ment of writers to account for their reading levels. I’m reminded, too, that writing across the curriculum must be accompanied by reading across the curriculum. This is as true for kindergarten as it is for the university. Finally, I’m left with a question I’d like to explore this summer—is it possible to make the reading-writing connection more explicit to students? To teachers? To parents?

So, put aside any reluctance you might have about plunging, once more, into reading or any hesitation you might have about middle school students and read Robb’s book. You’ll be refreshed, recharged, and ready to renew your own journey toward becoming an interactive teacher.

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A Composition of Consciousness: Roads of Reflection from Freire to Elbow


In A Composition of Consciousness: Roads of Reflection from Freire to Elbow, Patricia H. Perry offers some sound, or even revelatory, advice for professors of composition. Her proposed way of understanding the writing process as deliberately metacognitive and dialogic can be fruitful for secondary school teachers of writing, though the rhetorical angle of Perry’s tract is intended to more broadly and philosophically take up—and take on—trends and attitudes prevalent in the academy, in the freshman composition classrooms located there, and in the field of literacy instruction.

Perry explains the influence that Paulo Freire’s work has had on her philosophy and practice as a composition teacher. She contends that the most important work teachers and students can enact is performed at the site of students’ consciousness. It echoes Freire’s work among—and with—Brazilian peasants toward the realization of transitive and perhaps critical consciousness, explaining Freirean concepts as she traces their relevance to her proposed methodology. Perry exhorts using dialogue to encourage students to become metacognitive composers and citizens. Because it is through consciousness that we experience, interpret, and elect how to act in the world, Perry contends that any pedagogy that over-
looks consciousness cannot have true personal or political significance for our students.

While Perry advocates a dialogic method for guiding students to develop their awareness of their own conscious experience of writing processes and topics, because of her goal, her teaching is fundamentally student centered. Thus, she draws upon Peter Elbow’s work as well as Freire’s in arriving at a “composition of consciousness.” Perry takes on criticism of Elbow’s expressivist practice as apolitical or, worse, elitist, in order to reclaim his theory and approach as dialogic. In particular, Perry finds that a full reading of Elbow’s “believing game” and “cooking”—letting the ingredients of a composition communicate with and flavor one another—encompasses an author’s apprehension of his or her work in the context of an audience. Elbow’s praxis extends beyond the author and the text and is a potentially political enterprise through the dialogism inherent in the writing process and the metacognition and reflection that dialogue, both internal and external, demands.

To learn to write, Perry contends, students must write to learn. She proposes that writing instruction ought to center on creating knowledge about writing. Perry suggests that we have not given process writing our full ideological and institutional support. “We need to stop and think long and hard,” she argues further, “before taking steps down the post process path” (208). Her proposal that we work with our students toward achieving a composition of consciousness is a call for a recommitment to the theoretical underpinnings that built and braced the process writing movement. Perry locates consciousness as not only the site of but the basis for knowledge making.

Specifically, as she calls for an approach to writing instruction based upon dialogue and reflection, Perry sets out not only to reestablish Freire and to rehabilitate—or redefine—Elbow, but to challenge three regnant approaches to writing pedagogy: positivism, critical pedagogy, and social construction (strange bedfellows, those, as Perry acknowledges). Perry first acknowledges and describes the extensive and unsettled debate over the nature of consciousness, explaining that, for her purposes as a writing teacher, it is the “target and tool for creating knowledge about writing” (11). She claims that positivist approaches, such as those advanced by E.D. Hirsch, wrongly and simplistically cast writing as a mechanized skill and consider instruction as one size fits all. Perry notes, as many educators have, that this viewpoint is not only reductive but reactionary in that it ignores the inequities such an approach serves to perpetuate, as well as overlooks the Freirean concept recognizing the learner as present in the construction of meaning.

That said, Perry goes on to stress the limits of critical pedagogy and the social constructionist approach. Her composition of—and in and through—consciousness sees learners as individuals with unique experiences, outlooks, and needs. Perry claims that any approach that addresses them as merely constituted by sociocultural institutions and positions will fail to tap their rich inner lives and to engage them with the writing process. She further cautions that in critical and social constructionist approaches to literacy instruction, the literacy component can get short shrift. That is, the topic of research and description can become privileged, overreflective attention to oneself as a writer.

While Perry’s call that we avoid this is aptly heeded, she sets up a false dilemma: though a focus on the research and writing topic can dominate the composition-class experience at the expense of exploration of the research and writing processes, it needn’t. Given time, we can guide our students to consider both. Indeed, their contemplation of the former can inform their manipulation of the latter, and Perry’s call to critical consciousness can be turned upon the issues students take up in their research. Ultimately, Perry wants students to depart the composition classroom with a cognitive repertoire for thinking about writing and to be present in their continuing construction of knowledge. Perry’s goal is important, and where realized, should yield rich rewards for our students. But her philosophy already informs practice where freshman composition is taught at my institution (the University of Iowa), as well as in its program for preparing literacy instructors. So while the author’s hoped-for world is worth striving to attain, her view of current circumstances is perhaps too grim. Moreover, most of the freshmen who enter the composition
course that I teach expect to learn about writing. These students are, however, often uncertain what such learning will look like, especially the students in the “average” sections. Perry’s call for students to reflect upon their process, indeed to be held accountable for doing so, is worth heeding. The strategies and ways of thinking about writing that she exhorts we help our students internalize are worth cultivating, again as a joint, dialogic enterprise. She is wise to note that this is a time-consuming project—not only in terms of intensive sessions but also in terms of extended practice over time—and to suggest that our institutional systems for providing writing instruction need to account for this in terms of class size and course length.

Reading Perry’s book and mulling my own response to her writing and ideas brought to mind the question of audience. Perhaps more of her colleagues agree with Perry than she knows. But, then, part of her mission in writing this book is to suggest that perhaps Freire’s work is more foundational and Elbow’s is more in line with their thinking than her colleagues are aware. Whether or not accepting Perry’s argument will lead us to change or merely affirm our views, her linking of theory to practice is worth tracing.

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