Within and Beyond the Writing Process in the Secondary English Classroom

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The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers

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The writing process model has over several decades reached such widespread acceptance—approaching the dubious distinction of conventional wisdom—that it is easy to forget that it hasn't been around forever. The authors of Within and Beyond the Writing Process in the Secondary English Classroom have made it their aim to take stock of how this model continues to reshape the teaching of writing. It is an ambitious undertaking, and one that I believe is realized by this eminently practical volume. The book offers a timely reappraisal for veterans as well as an excellent resource for new teachers of English.

Consider your first acquaintance with the concept of writing process. For many teachers, process-related revelations have taken place during writing project institutes, where the profound benefits of peer response for revision are experienced firsthand. Those of us who entered the teaching profession in the 1970s may well recall the theory in its infancy. My own story would be set in Alaska's capital city of Juneau. A newcomer to the state, I had unwittingly arrived in the North at a fortuitous hour for educators. The pipeline from Prudhoe Bay recently completed, oil revenues provided for lavish new school facilities in remote villages as well as an enviable array of educational programs. One such project, the development of a tenth grade remedial composition course for the state's Centralized Correspondence Study program serving several thousand home-schoolers in both rural and urban settings, fell to me. It was in this windfall environment that I would first encounter the idea of writing process.

Until that time, curriculum for Alaska's correspondence programs, staffed by a cadre of certified "advisory teachers" in the capital (with whom I served, briefly), relied on materials available nationally, much of it authored in the Midwest. English 10 consisted of workbooks and emphasized correctness. The vision was to provide culturally and geographically appropriate courses instead. Before developing the course, I set out to become acquainted with current research on teaching writing, relying primarily on the ERIC microfiche archives at the state library in those predigital days. What I discovered, of course, was the theory of the writing process—a revolution in the making. Needless to say, the theory commandeered my course, though it initially proved a hard-sell to the more traditionally minded administrators. The writing process model has continued to develop ever since. Yet the challenge of reconciling tensions between process and correctness (consider standardized testing) is still very much with us. As Samuel Totten argues in a recent issue of The Quarterly, the writing process movement represents an ongoing "paradigm shift" that remains a work in progress to this day. The book's final chapter (discussed later) offers a brief history of the discipline, providing some insight into how such things have come to pass.

Within and Beyond the Writing Process is a forward-looking book that does not skirt such difficult issues as the place of grammar and correctness in a process-based classroom, or the
teaching of conventional genres of school writing, such as expository essays and research papers. Moreover, it forges important connections between Expressivist pedagogies and more community-oriented, social-action approaches. In fact, the book opens with several classroom vignettes that suggest its overall scope: encompassing personal narrative, expressivist, and social action approaches, as well as reflection on writing process. The opening chapter also offers a number of sensible tenets about instruction summarized as “assumptions about writing and the teaching of composition, consonant with holistic approaches to literacy development . . . they encourage an immersion in reading and writing; they discourage the fragmentation of the writing process into a skills approach; and they recognize the interplay between reading and writing” (8). These core philosophies underlie the book as a whole.

The second chapter addresses the various ways that the term literacy has been defined and applied before turning to its social consequences. Traditional, foundational notions of “cultural” and “functional” literacies are contrasted with more progressive ones, such as “visual” and “critical” literacies. Visual literacy, of course, would extend the range of “texts”—whether print, visual, or virtual—whereas critical literacy views writing as a way of enabling students to situate and express themselves in relation to public issues in a democratic sense. The choices we make as teachers among these conceptions of literacy have far-reaching implications for how writing is to be taught:

Are our decisions based on giving students authority and responsibility for their own writing or on our need to control? Are our decisions forced on us by large-scale assessment tests or developed from what will make students responsible writers who care about their writing? Encouraging students to write on topics they care about, to write for real audiences, and to help them negotiate the system for positive change in their lives through their writing is an inherently political act. (19)

The practical third chapter focuses specifically on writing as a process. The evolution of this model—from expert to novice, from linear to recursive, from cognitive to social—is recounted briefly here, as are landmark publications that have contributed to a student-centered vision of process. The authors offer brief reflections on their own writing experiences to illustrate that, despite similarities, our writing processes are ultimately individualized and context specific. Various strategies for invention, particularly journal writing, are explored as prewriting tools. Approaches to revision, reflection, and publication are also addressed. I especially appreciate the clear guidelines provided for process-based classroom practices such as peer response groups and teacher-student conferences, such as this reminder:

Asking questions, pointing out areas that are hard to follow or unclear, making careful suggestions, and listening to the student’s responses, are all more effective conference strategies. . . . On the other hand, the teacher shouldn’t hesitate to use his or her own expertise to help the student think about how to proceed. . . . When working with first drafts, focus on content, organization, clarity and development of ideas with details and examples. Save attention to correctness for later drafts after the piece has been revised. Don’t confuse the student by commenting on sentence level problems and mechanical errors when the paper still needs work on the larger issues of content and organization. What’s the use of correcting a spelling error if the entire sentence is thrown out when the paper is revised? (60-1)

Grammar and correctness take center stage in the fourth chapter. Here, the authors again offer historical perspective, as well as a theoretical framework for thinking about the issues—whether defining error or addressing dialect and linguistic diversity—before tackling classroom strategies. They raise difficult questions including how to decide which aspects of grammar should be taught. When and how is specialized terminology truly useful to student writers? If we believe in teaching grammar in the context of student writing, when and how is it best introduced? While the jury may still be out on such sweeping questions, this is where the volume really shines. Time and again, the text advocates a host of sensible classroom practices aimed at helping students develop as writers.

Remaining chapters address a number of other important areas such as teaching essays and research papers, writing in response to literature, and, responding to student writing. With regard to assessment, the use of rubrics and portfolios is considered in relation to both development in writing and standardized testing. Moreover, the detrimental effects of high-stakes evaluation are addressed honestly and critically.

The volume closes with a useful overview of composition studies that places writing process pedagogies into a historical context, from the tenets of classical rhetoric to contemporary theories of literacy and discourse. The authors critique prescriptive
practices associated with the “current-traditional” model such as the formulaic “five-paragraph” essay that “suppresses imagination, the value of the individual voice, and individual commitment to values. It betrays our understanding of how children must write to think for themselves . . . and for testing the truth of their own ideas” (226). They credit expressivists, on the other hand, with contributions “not only in the articulation of the writing process, but also in the privileging of self as subject, the student-centered curriculum, [and] the emphasis on making meaning” through student writing (229). As teachers of writing attuned to diversity, we can also “help students learn respect for a wide variety of ways to say things and to express one’s self” (234). And here the book takes an ideological turn. Literacy ultimately impacts students’ lives in a diverse world beyond the classroom, after all, and their ability to communicate effectively in many other contexts as well. Academic success, the authors remind us, is but one important outcome of learning in school what writing can do.

References

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The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers

Sheridan Blau is the one who always reminded me to notice “noticings.” And as I think about how to begin talking about Blau’s long-awaited book, The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers, I notice I am using the word talking, rather than writing. Talk seems the operative word for what is a compelling conversation with this consummate teacher/thinker/reader. In The Literature Workshop, Sheridan Blau translates what goes on in his own classroom and workshops for teachers into a text that transcends pedagogy, theory, and research to attain a wide-ranging yet impeccably ordered journey into the rarefied realm of what teaching literature can be.

As a veteran teacher involved with many of the issues that have concerned Sheridan Blau over the years, I have had my share of conversations with this master teacher and educational leader. I worked with him on the difficult problems of how best to design a large-scale assessment of student reading and writing, and we have engaged in passionate dialogue about subjects ranging from how to get at the meaning of a poem to the rationale for ways of using graphics to teach metaphor thinking. Do we always agree? Often, at the beginning of an exploration, we start from different vantage points: Sheridan is the university academic, and I am the high school teacher; Sheridan is the logician, and I am the poet. We’ve benefited from the resultant give and take. Where there is initial accord, there is no probing of meanings, no questioning of one’s own beliefs, no possibility of reversing one’s opening position. There is no room for the “aha!” that nearly always transpires during a conversation with Sheridan.

And it is this kind of enlightenment that awaits the reader of this text: the excitement of moving beyond one’s own perceptions of what reading is, of what the teaching of literature is, to what it can mean to “teach texts and their readers.” Be forewarned, however: you can’t read this text just once. You will find yourself doing what Blau suggests we all do as readers: reread. It’s the rereading of this book that will allow readers to internalize the dimensions, possibilities, and power of Blau’s literature workshop.

Blau begins by presenting a “pedagogical epiphany.” He describes an encounter with a class of college freshmen early in his teaching career. As he stood in front of this class, he began to wonder why his insights into the particular essay under consideration ran so much deeper than those of the bright young people in his class. And then he recognized that he is the one who had spent the evening before pondering the essay. It was his job to “come to class prepared to discuss the essay in ways that would illuminate its difficulties and advance our inquiry…” (2). As he told the students, any one of them who assumed equal responsibility and applied equal effort could have done as well. This early classroom encounter gave him the impetus for attempting, over his lengthy professional life, to redress a teaching situation in which the experience of learning was the