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Reading for Models of Best Practice

Jackie Frens

***Time for Meaning* by Randy Bomer**

Do you remember sick days? In the morning time stretched before you, smooth and crisp like an unused hospital sheet. By the middle of the day, it had wrinkled and began to feel slightly damp and uncomfortable, wasted. Near the end of the day, it appeared tangled and almost knotty. "Was my sick day successful? Did I recover in any way? Will another day at home be necessary?" As I spent an entire afternoon and evening reading *Time for Meaning* by Randy Bomer (New York: Teachers College, 1995), it began to feel almost like a sick day. I took in fluids at a constant rate. My body got crampy as it stayed in one position for nearly six hours. Fully-prepared meals were out of the question. But, when I encountered the last chapter, I felt that Bomer's book could be likened to an extended "Get Well" card. His candid accounts of his teaching experiences assured me that we all have the power to heal if we simply take time for meaning. But, it does take time.

He did not simply present a formula that he guaranteed to "ka-bam" transform a classroom into a hothouse of literary talent. Bomer followed the writing advice he gave his students. He admits that the book is a work-in-progress. In the next few years, he may change his mind about what he says about teaching writing. At the same time, the generous amounts of student writing samples and the practical classroom ideas provide the reader with reasons to trust Bomer. He was able to capture and hold a reader's attention from start to finish with anecdotes and reflections from his classroom and those of the teachers he admires most.

I have taught as a classroom and substitute teacher at many grade levels and in different social settings. For me, Bomer's experiences in rural and urban environments among different aged students gave me a reason to want to listen to him. However,

I began to turn skeptical when he spoke of sustaining lengthy periods of writing among his students. I mean, it sounded like he was not even using a textbook at all! But, just when I was about to dismiss him as a teaching "god," he would have one of his students voice an off-hand remark about how "they never do anything in this class." I would smile. He had regained my appreciation for his adept sense of the struggle each English teacher endures in helping students discover meaning. No, he wasn't using a textbook, but it was possible for me to do the same.

Our subject material is each member of our class—as the author explains—not a specific book or poem or writing technique. We want our students to attempt to shape time by capturing it in words. Bomer suggests a notebook as the tool for this vital activity. A notebook is a way of helping the students make observations as they move through their lives. He wants them to capture moments as they shower in the morning or go out to dinner at night. Students unearth meaning in writing and drawing. They collect shiny, dull, weird, or ordinary chunks of them in the "zip lock" bag of their notebooks. Later they sort through their findings for something to polish up and bring to final draft.

Bomer models observation and constant writing. His students are able to see his notebook pages that contain cross-outs, arrows, and scribbles. He is not the one with all the right answers. He allowed me to see that my writing, even the first drafts, will be beneficial for my students. These drafts will give them courage to write.

In allowing the students time to explore ideas, Bomer cautions against cramming so many skills into a year. The students need time to locate what meaning their lives offer. This book is about creating meaning by giving our students time to trust themselves and us. Only when our students

become a community, are they able to find meaning in belonging.

As I reflect on my writing and being a teacher, I see those roles merging. In writing, I become the student and then the teacher. The act of writing always brings about discovery, which is what being a student is about. Any writer is also a teacher since people observe what they do and want to know how it's done. What better way to spend forty-five minutes of a school day anyway?

Bomer examines aspects of time in refreshing and unexpected ways to close each chapter. The reader senses that he lifted these reflections right out of his own notebook. When I stretched and finally closed the book at the end of six hours, I opened a notebook to begin these reflections. The pages contained clean lines and possibilities. What I needed was time. Time for meaning.

***Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents* by Linda Rief**

All around me adolescent girls burst into song, screamed randomly, and then surged ahead of me. I strained my ears to hear my thoughts as I attempt to grasp *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents* by Linda Rief (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992). As I read of Rief's many methods to cultivate and shape adolescent thought, my 15-year-old sister and I were waiting outside of Planet Hollywood in Chicago as fans lined up to meet Hanson—a band whose members are between the ages of 12 and 17. Rief's book cited pages of amazing student pieces, while pressing in on every side were fans whose lives had been influenced by the music and lyrics of their peers. Had Rief been present, she might have chuckled and thought the possibilities for writing material were endless. The experience could probably be represented in a poem or maybe even a visual art piece, possibly in dance and more than likely, a song. Each response would somehow be shaped by what each person had been reading at the time.*

Rief drew me in immediately by telling of how her first teaching job was as a substitute, as I too have been a substitute for the past two years. She secretly loved to eavesdrop on her fellow teachers just as I did. Her book invites the reader to do just that in her seventh-grade classroom. But like believing you don't need a cart or even a basket when stopping by a grocery store for just one item, you soon realize that your arms are overflowing with wonderful, practical ideas as you browse through the chapters. Her pages are crammed with samples of students' work. She mentions several times that skeptics like to dismiss her ideas by saying that her students are gifted. Honestly, on a first read, I began to notice a particular student's name

mentioned on a regular basis, and I too wondered if Rief relied heavily on one brilliant student to validate her methods. But as you move through the book, Rief mentions that she was able to write a half an hour's worth of evaluative summaries on fifty of her students one year. She has since revised the lengthiness of this evaluation, but her point was that she was able to do this for every student. The student-centered lessons she had created are responsible for her awareness of each student's growth. Further, you will notice the "Student Portfolio" section includes almost a dozen students' words. Nahanni is not the only student who responded well to the "diversity" that Rief strives for in her classroom.

This book is as much of a challenge to fellow teachers to push themselves as readers and writers as it is a sharing of teaching methods. Rief includes samples of her own responses to reading and writing. These were refreshing for me since it demonstrated to me that the odd things I notice when I read a piece might be valuable to my students. I could capture these thoughts if I kept a reader's-writer's notebook just as she does and encourages her students to do as well. I appreciated Rief's reminder of the unbreakable connection between reading and writing. I was convinced to take up the challenge and read as a writer and write as a reader. Rief herself models extensive reading. Each chapter ends with "Works Cited," "Further References," and reading lists appear in several places.

Her extensive reading enriches the units she chooses to explore with her students. The unit with the most power to transform students' lives, in my opinion, is included in Chapter Four—Generations: Writing and Reading for Life. Students examine their beliefs and assumptions about the elderly, read stories from and about senior citizens, and finally meet with an older person. What impressed me, is that although Rief wanted the students to walk in another person's shoes for awhile, she also allowed for them to express their perceptions of older people. Balance. The works she selected were from Dr. Seuss to Alice Walker, with many authors and poets in between. Students responded to the reading in their notebooks. It is difficult not to feel an odd tightening in the chest when reading some of the students' work. They are discovering what it means to really care for others, especially those who may need so much more from them than they think they can give. Rief respects her students enough to trust them with the task of maturing. Again, there is balance or diversity, in that she ends the chapter with students reflecting on adolescence.

The diversity Rief speaks of and refers to in the title prevails in all that she offers her students. She

addresses ways of reaching the student interested primarily in "Dirt Bike" magazines and the one who has begun a technological thriller that may very well end up being published. The classic evaluation enigma is made simpler as Rief shares her experiences and the solutions that came from them. A color photo section displays the result of a teaming with the art teacher as students responded to a book with a professional art piece. *Seeking Diversity* begs a second and third reading. In fact, if you take the suggested reading seriously, this book could be a teacher's companion for many, many summers to come.

About the Author

Jackie Frens, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, has been substitute teaching in various districts in Ingham and Eaton counties for the past two years.

*My response to the Planet Hollywood experience spoken of in the opening paragraph:

Hans On?

Jackie Frens

*Lean fingers, strong hands and energetic arms
strum, play and beat instruments*

*Thoughtful lyrics and carefully crafted melodies
blend together.*

Scratchy voices lift pure notes.

*The music calls out, Siren-like, drawing a face-
less crowd.*

Stealthy shoulders slide forward.

Television cameras invite louder screams.

*Loud renditions of the same songs are repeated
again and again and again.*

*The faded faces of the band watch from \$35
t-shirts that must be washed cold and tumbled
dry.*