

1998

Assistance and Explanations for Secondary Whole Language Teachers

Susan Steffel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Steffel, Susan (1998) "Assistance and Explanations for Secondary Whole Language Teachers," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1439>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Professional Book Review

Susan Steffel

Assistance and Explanations for Secondary Whole Language Teachers

Although the whole language approach has been around for many years, there has been a reluctance to incorporate it above the middle school level. *Uncovering the Curriculum: Whole Language in Secondary and Postsecondary Classrooms* by James and Kathleen Strickland (Heinemann, 1993) and *Crossing Over: Whole Language for Secondary English Teachers* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994) by Harold M. Foster are two books that offer explanation and assistance for secondary and postsecondary teachers interested in using whole language concepts but confused about how.

Foster, in *Crossing Over*, seeks to address the needs of students in today's world, one that is much more complex than the one in which most of us grew up. Foster, influenced by Scholes, Booth, Coles, and Rosenblatt, combines his own story as student, teacher, and parent with those of other teachers in a composite of methodologies. Splitting his subject into three parts, Foster presents the theory, application, and reflection necessary to implement whole language.

Part One provides an overview of the complexities of whole language. Chapter One addresses the definition of whole language, the theories behind it, and its historical roots. Chapter Two contains Foster's personal narrative of his own transformation to a teacher of whole language. Part Two deals with the teaching of reading and literature, the teaching of writing, and the new literacies. Chapters Three to Seven look at the application of whole language teaching in literature and reading, including drama, poetry, the classics, and young adult novels. Chapters Eight to Ten deal specifically with the writing workshop, difficulties of teaching revision, as well as grading and keeping records. Chapters Eleven and Twelve look at specific literacies of film and television. Part

Three focuses on the process of becoming a whole language teacher, planning for the whole language classroom, and insuring that you remain a whole language teacher.

Foster focuses on multiple concrete examples of classrooms, the teachers being composites drawn from the many classroom teachers that he has worked with. Readers, drawn to the concrete, will appreciate his many anecdotal examples which demonstrate the application of theory. The book ends with a discussion on the importance of reflection for both students and teachers. He includes a strong endorsement of continued professional development for teachers who wish to remain alive and effective in the classroom. All chapters end with discussion questions and follow up activities, allowing readers to take the necessary steps to become whole language teachers. Further resources include recommended readings with brief annotations.

The Stricklands' *Uncovering the Curriculum* follows a more straightforward format, moving from a discussion of the transformational philosophy of learning, including whole language and its historic roots to its applications in the secondary classroom. Not limited to the subject of English,

the Stricklands demonstrate how whole language can be incorporated into other disciplines with strong benefits. One of the strongest arguments in Chapter One is a thorough discussion of what whole language is not. The Stricklands clearly debunk six of the most prevalent myths about whole language, including beliefs that whole language is limited to elementary grades, whole language classrooms lack structure, and that whole language is a fad.

Chapter Two moves into the reading and writing workshop, how to establish it, manage it, and maintain it. Chapter Three takes on the expanding traditional literary canon, clarifying the basics of reading theory and reminding us of what our own reading experiences have been. Next, New Criticism is contrasted with Reader-Response, and strategies for reader-response are applied to the whole language classroom and the literature curriculum. Chapter Four emphasizes the importance of oral language in the classroom and how to manage whole class and small group discussions. The Stricklands further discuss the use of questioning, the skill of listening, and peer response. Chapter Five focuses on reading and writing to learn, in the English classroom and across the curriculum. They outline the use of writing and response, thematic units, and learning journals and how they augment learning. Chapter Six takes on issues of grading. Beginning with the history of testing, it moves through a discussion of whole language assessment and evaluation with its multiple methods, including observations, anecdotal records, journals, logs, and portfolios. Chapter Seven looks at the benefits of a whole language approach for "at risk" students and how to address individual needs within the classroom. The Stricklands contend that whole language classrooms better meet the needs of students than tracking. Chapter Eight addresses technology in the whole language classroom and cautions against the inappropriate elevation of technology.

Chapter Nine concludes with the political ramifications of whole language in public education. How to defend your practice, how research may be used to criticize whole language, and the rise in censorship are all pragmatic issues that are addressed. Teachers using whole language must do so with a firm understanding of what it is and the theory that supports it. Further, they must go in with their eyes open, aware of the obstacles and opponents they may encounter.

Each chapter begins with a related quote, serving as focus for discussion. Chapters end with activities for further exploration and annotated bibliographies.

Both books contain valuable material. Foster uses a stringing together of composite classroom anecdotes that demonstrate the how-to's of implementing whole language. His *Crossing Over* emphasizes application and focuses on assisting teachers in designing actual lesson plans that use whole language philosophy.

The Stricklands, on the other hand, provide a stronger definition and philosophical base for whole language while at the same time including plenty of specific anecdotal classroom application. *Uncovering the Curriculum* gives the reader specific suggestions for the whole language classroom and offers a more thorough grounding in why particular activities may or may not work.

Both books pose questions that extend thinking and encourage their readers to take steps to incorporate whole language into their own classrooms, and both offer valuable bibliographies for further reading. Depending on readers' preferences for format, they will find both of these books helpful in their continued efforts to make classrooms meaningful places of learning.

About the Author

Susan Steffel, assistant LAJM editor, teaches English Education courses at Central Michigan University.