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Professional Book Reviews

Susan Sturock

You Can Teach Writing (With a Little Help from Your "Friends")

I love books—all sorts of books. And, I never sell or recycle any text of any sort. I know that some day, I am going to need a particular sentence, paragraph or whatever from that book, and I am going to have it, and I do. My books are not nice and neat. They are swollen, written on, and dog-eared. I drag them to and from my classroom, concerned that I might need to refer to something and I won't have it. I often thumb through a particular book and find things I had never noticed before. Many times the little pearl I happen upon, exactly extends, enriches, or provides me with a strategy which greatly benefits what I am trying to teach. It is almost a Zen experience—my own personal *Celestine Prophecy*!

Because I have such a long-term, friendly relationship with books, I turn to them for support, ideas, and knowledge when I find myself searching for answers in the form of teaching ideas and teaching philosophy. Books have been there when mentors were nowhere in sight.

My best information usually comes from looking in several places simultaneously, analyzing the synergy that develops from the multiple voices of the authors, and categorizing the types of information being written about according to who it is being written for and for what purpose. Most books I read for teaching seem to fall into the categories of "how to" texts or philosophical texts, but since the purposes of the books are different, they often complement each other. The three books I will discuss here do just that. *What a Writer Needs* by Ralph Fletcher and *Living Between the Lines* by Lucy McCormick Calkins are how-to texts; *Uncommon Sense* by John Mayher is a philosophical text, but all three speak to each other.

Fletcher's and Calkins' are great drag-around books because they are full of examples and reflections which help writing teachers understand what they are seeing in student work.

These books have the ability to become daily colleagues. They help a teacher move from the abstract desire to teach writing to the concrete reality of actually teaching it.

In spite of the fact that both texts are "how-to's," Fletcher and Calkins do not focus on the same aspects of writing instruction. Lucy Calkins' years as an elementary classroom teacher and her sensitivity to the pulse of everyday life and what can and does take place during an educational day, make her a wonderful resource for handling the unwieldiness of teaching writing. In *Living Between the Lines*, she talks to the reader about how to prepare a physical space for writing and how to handle conferencing and evaluation of writing. She speaks about the necessity of being a consumer of words, and about the need for the opportunity for personal reflection in order for professional growth to take place.

Calkins shows her understanding of the complexity of the task of writing and does not discuss it in simplistic ways. She helps teachers handle the everydayness of writing instruction by providing examples of student work and examples of student-teacher dialogue. Her text is a whole-to-part vision of what can occur in a writing class-

room. She uses the canvas of the classroom to paint broad pictures of the possibilities of writing instruction.

Since many levels of writing ability exist in the same classroom, it is often difficult to know how to access student writing and how to help students grow in their writing abilities. Calkins does a wonderful job of providing examples of writing, and continues to point out through dialogue exactly what transpires to help a student move from a somewhat simple text to a rich text. This is the kind of help teachers are looking for. Most of us can develop writing spaces for our students, and most of us can figure out how to infuse writing in other content areas. The rub comes when we have to conference and assess the writing. Of course, the longer teachers are involved with writing instruction, the more able they are to perform assessment. On the way to teacher ability, however, Calkin's text is a blessing.

Fletcher does a wonderful job of subliminally reinforcing the connection between reading and writing. Like Calkins, he provides examples of student work, but he also infuses the writing of other adults from both literature and casual acquaintance into his text. This text is probably more useful for a teacher who is working with children who are at least in fourth grade or in third grade, if the children have already had significant writing opportunities. Unlike Calkins, he omits logistics discussions and pushes ahead into discussions of how to teach children what we mean by voice, how to actually develop a character, or how to make a plot more complex. This advice is always coupled with references to literature which I feel is really how children learn to become effective writers. Before we can speak intelligibly, we must listen. Before we can develop our own voice as writers, we must learn to listen for one and recognize it in others.

Reading through Fletcher this year has increased my awareness of the finer points of writing. While we need to know how to set up our rooms and keep track of student development (Calkins), we also need to know about the intricacies of the art of writing. Fletcher does this for teachers. He discusses the art of specificity, a sense of place, tension—all techniques of writing

which students must sense as good readers before they can produce good writing. He provides wonderful examples and provides references for further reading experiences.

What makes these two texts such great drag-arounds is that they provide a teacher with an opportunity to evolve into being a teacher of writing. By reading and doing, teachers can begin to shape what works for them. These books are prescriptive in that many times as we begin to teach writing we don't really know what we are looking for, much less how to get it. These two texts are very clear in helping a teacher identify the correlates of quality writing and in providing opportunities to achieve this end. They are excellent day-to-day companions that writing teachers are so badly in need of.

Mayher's *Uncommon Sense* is not a day-to-day companion. His work is philosophical in nature and is good to read when wondering why you ever started this nightmare called process writing. This is also a wonderful text to keep near at hand because it just makes teachers really think about what the heck they are doing and why.

Mayher's work looks at how we teach children in general. While Calkins and Fletcher are very pointed, Mayher is very broad in his focus. His essential message is that if we continue to insist on mundane instruction, we are going to continue to get mundane students—a situation the democracy of our nation cannot tolerate. This book is filled with thought-provoking issues—the kind of issues that should be discussed in faculty lounges. Mayher's book is health food for the inquiring mind.

His discussions of effective teaching are broad yet very connected. They sweep from student self-esteem in hierarchal learning to discussion of Piaget's Zone of Proximal Development to differences in educational philosophy in England and the United States. What he says is very worthwhile and continues to fascinate me as I read and reread. He does provide examples of student work, but it is not to model how to teach; it is to model why to teach through the lens of language.

Reading Mayher requires significant background knowledge in the areas of teaching and curriculum. This is not a drag-around book be-

cause it has too much to say that requires the reader to sit down and think. This is a text which would serve teachers well as they stand firm (either with themselves or with others) in maintaining or establishing writing programs. It articulates for us those powerful ideas which we have come to accept but have shoved to the back of our minds. It is refreshing and affirming for some readers, and I am certain it is enlightening for others since it illustrates the connections between reading, writing, listening, and speaking by citing educational and cognitive psychologists (Piaget, Bloom, Vygotsky). Mayher is a sophisticated academician whose work provides pedagogical depth to arguments about why we should teach through the lens of language and what teaching in this manner will provide students (thus our nation) with as a result. Although his voice is gentle and non-threatening, what he says is very broad in scope and very deep in consequence.

Teaching writing is complex. It requires that teachers be readers and writers themselves; it requires that teachers have strong pedagogical philosophies upon which to stand. Calkins and Fletcher are the authors who put on running shoes and trot down the halls with teachers. They are friends when there is no e-mail access, and it's just you and your passion for teaching writing. Their texts are meant to be tossed into book bags,

made overhead copies of, and read on the fly. On the other hand, Mayher demands that the reader sit down and listen carefully since his book speaks to the serious side of the reader's professional development and makes demands on the reader's professional sophistication.

Each of these books can stand alone well. However, reading and using these three texts in concert will provide teachers with not only what to do, but why to do it. Reading only one will provide the reader with a worthwhile one-dimensional perspective of writing; reading all three rounds this experience. Like the strain of a wonderful melody, Calkins and Fletcher can dance through the life of a classroom, and yet without the complexity of Mayher's harmony, the dance may be short because we have failed to provide an adequate structure to sustain it. These texts make good friends with good reason.

Works Cited

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