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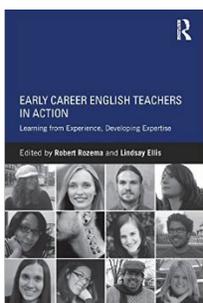
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REVIEW

Early Career English Teachers in Action: Learning from Experience, Developing Expertise by Robert Rozema and Lindsay Ellis. Routledge, 2014.

Review by Mary Anna Kruch



The number of teacher candidates entering English education programs continues to decline, and nearly half of early career teach-

ers leave the profession in the first five years. This trend reflects not only a drop in student enrollment but also a lack of motivation to enter and then stay in the teaching profession.

In the Introduction to *Early-Career English Teachers in Action: Learning from Experience, Developing Expertise*, Robert Rozema affirms that all teachers possess narratives, but too few teachers remain long enough to learn from them (2). Some stories serve as therapy, some as amusement, and others—particularly those of English teachers—can lead to reflective practice. Co-editors Rozema and Lindsay Ellis have written a text that serves as a realistic representation of the lives of early career teachers through the stories they have collected. This compilation of narratives enlightens and validates the voices of novice teachers who strive to provide students with the appropriate knowledge and experiences needed to succeed as learners. Unfortunately, these efforts have not always compensated the passion that teachers bring to their jobs.

New teachers benefit from mentorships, opportunities to participate in professional networks, and the sharing of teacher narratives. Rozema and Ellis focus on the latter, bringing the importance of early career teachers' narratives to the forefront via first-person accounts related to the issues of culture, school climate, curriculum, teacher identity, and student behavior. Since story-telling is a natural procedure of self-reflection, the practice among early career educators has great potential to support teaching growth and development. Ellis notes that the complexity of school days can be examined in teachers' stories because it compels a cognitive movement through a beginning, middle, and ending (p. 4).

When teachers work alone or feel as though they do, there is a tendency to mentally repeat negative occurrences over and over again rather than arrive at some type of closure. While closure is not always possible, Rozema and Ellis held a writers' retreat so that new career teachers could compose narratives from evocative experiences and examine them for probable learning. By sharing what they have experienced with others, new teachers are able to discuss what they wish to learn from the myriad of new concepts and strategies in their own unique settings. They can examine their narratives to uncover ways to better navigate stressful situations and set their course for a more positive, fulfilling career. Personal narratives go beyond research and pedagogy, reflecting the humanity of teaching and learning processes, presented with the idea of broadening empathy in readers, especially those in teacher preparation programs.

In the second chapter, Rozema defines school culture as "the language, knowledge, values, beliefs, symbols,

rituals, and norms that characterize a given school" (13). Within schools, several subcultures exist; these are organizational culture, teacher culture, collaborative culture, and student cultures (p. 14-15). The student culture is often identified by stratified groups. Groups at odds with one another affect classroom lessons and classroom climate.

Managing a classroom with underlying discontent is a difficult endeavor for many veterans as well as new teachers, so taking time to write down what happened and reflect upon why it happened can serve as an outlet and an opportunity to share and reflect critically. Also, the development of rapport and trust among teacher and students is of particular importance, as students establish their identities within their peer groups. Therefore, when classroom narratives are shared with other educators, issues become a shared concern for student success, and the chances for viable solutions improve.

Not everyone works in a traditional school with routine issues. Alternative high school teacher David Jagusch chose his first assignment in Kenya, and in his narrative "Lessons from the Slum" expressed his surprise that students living in poverty cared little what he thought of them, paying more attention to daily duties. He said, "They cared only about the coming rain that would cause their home foundations to sink and flood" (37). When students became accustomed to him, they wanted to hear stories of his homeland, and when classmates came up with correct responses, the entire class sang congratulations to each pupil. They truly shared a unique student culture. Jagusch wrote, "There were classrooms constructed in a cornfield, providing children with infinite somethings in the middle of a thousand nothings" (39).

Both Rozema and Ellis recall and write about their own teaching experiences in successive chapters. In Chapter Three, “School Climate,” Rozema notes the vast difference in school climates between two secondary schools to which he made regular visits in his observation of student teachers. One provided positive, homey, gathering places for students to socialize and teachers to plan. The other left him feeling dispirited over the limits of a post-WW II building with desks-in-a-row and narrow hallways, coupled with the negative way its teachers perceived their disruptive students. School climate generally describes the overall environment of a school, including its buildings, architectural features, green spaces or lack of them.

Other more subjective factors, such as the degree to which parents are actively involved in their children’s education, contribute to a school climate. In “Loving and Leaving,” Tami Teshima describes her first two years at a small alternative school that sat fifty feet from a major traffic route. The majority of students had been expelled from their home districts and struggled with many personal, economic, and academic problems.

The school was a place of safety and comfort to students but at first look, the school reminded Teshima of a scene out of the film *Dangerous Minds*. Many of her coworkers were negative, further contributing to a negative school climate. Just as Michelle Pfeiffer’s character as a teacher worked to provide students with all they needed, Teshima worked long hours planning engaging activities. And just as Pfeiffer’s character in the film neglected to maintain her personal well-being, eventually Teshima found herself in the same circumstances, and left.

Curriculum can cause a lot of stress for teachers, even when they are familiar with it. Schools are often locked into programmed learning due to low standardized test scores, or the materials that are on hand may be outdated or inappropriate. All teachers are curriculum designers whose job is to construct a palatable set of standards-aligned units for their students. In Chapter Four, Ellis discusses intended curriculum (the plan as drafted) and achieved curriculum (the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students actually learn) (p. 87). The job to create curriculum that serves the students in a particular setting with particular needs is very complex. In his narrative, “The Meaning of Success,” Adam Kennedy benefitted from a veteran colleague who told him that for her, constant self-evaluation, revision, and re-evaluation worked best for her. Kennedy learned very early on that great teachers who can go the distance view themselves as lifelong learners because they seek constant improvement.

Chapter Five directs the reader to a close consideration of one’s identity when working as part of a large teaching staff. Ellis says that identity is often described as how one sees oneself and how others see us (119). Teaching identities can conflict with other identities outside of school, and Ellis provides a full discussion of being a teacher among teachers, a teacher among family and friends, a teacher in society, and being a teacher with yourself. In Amanda Brown’s narrative, “Integrity,” she articulates a personal journey of found identity, one where her students showed her that identity goes far beyond the content preparation or college degree.

In the final chapter, “Student Behavior,” early career teachers share recollections and lessons learned while interacting with students in the

day-to-day classroom environment as well as how the spectrum of student behavior forces teachers to contemplate their expectations, rules, and why sometimes the rules must be flexible—humanity, respect, and humor affect interactions with students. Rozema’s discussion of adolescents, cultural literacy, and what it means to engage adolescents is especially practical, emphasizing the reality that students will remember their teachers as a feeling more than anything—the greeting upon entering a classroom, the consideration given on bad days, and the respectful exchange following an inappropriate behavior that saved face in front of peers. The idea, Rozema believes, is to manage misbehaviors discretely. With time and experience, classroom management becomes a matter of focusing on engaging learners rather than a system of corrective management.

Throughout Early Career English Teachers in Action, Rozema and Ellis lead us into each topic and related narratives with useful analysis and their own personal stories. Early career teachers’ narratives will cause readers to examine their educational practices, perhaps motivate them to write and share their stories with their peers, and at the very least gain insight into their chosen vocation. Novice teachers will be encouraged, feel support, and acquire special benefit from the discussion topics and activities offered at the conclusion of each chapter. For all of us in the profession, this text invites us to pause, to reflect, and to share our stories with other educators, for both our sakes as well as theirs.

Mary Anna Kruch, a former middle school teacher and university assistant professor, now supervises student teachers for Northern Michigan University.