

Book Reviews

Gene Stanford (Chair) and the Committee on Classroom Practices.
HOW TO HANDLE THE PAPER LOAD.
Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979.
135 pp. \$5.00.

How to Handle the Paper Load (in teaching writing) was a theme topic for 1979-80 of the Committee on Classroom Practices of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Accordingly a call for papers on the topic went out in December 1978 to elementary, secondary, college and university teachers through the various publications of the NCTE. This book comprises the twenty-seven best manuscripts submitted to the Committee, tied together by an introduction from its Chairman and grouped into six loosely defined solutions to the problem: ungraded writing; teacher involvement—not evaluation; student self-editing; practice with parts; focused feedback; alternative audiences.

The book is designed to appeal to a wide range of teachers at various levels. It is somewhat like a cookbook, each “recipe” having no dependency on prior information in order to be used. In a way, this is the book’s strength. Nearly all the papers present ideas that are specific, practical, and practicable. With the possible exception of Monica Josten’s “Role Playing, Writing and Red Pencils,” which demands a certain audacity and sparkle to execute, most of the suggestions constitute minor and safe departures from regular classroom procedure, and they do seem to solve the problem of how to handle the paper load.

In another way the “cookbook” approach is a liability. Many cookbooks give precise directions for preparing foods; however there is usually no discussion or advice as to whether the recipe followed will contribute to the growth or healthy maintenance of the consumer. From the point of view of nutrition some of the recipes may in fact be of no value or harmful to the individual who is at the receiving end.

Like this kind of cookbook the collection of articles in the *How to Handle the Paper Load* appears to treat the problem with little consideration for the development of a coherent and consistent view of writing as a basis for solutions to the problem of the paper load. This is unfortunate, for there is much in the recently developed models of the writing process of such authors as James Britton, Andrew Wilkinson, and Donald Graves that could be brought to bear directly on the questions of how much and what kind of intervention is needed by the English teacher in the development and the evaluation of student writing. With one or two exceptions, there is no evidence in the articles themselves that the authors are aware of these models and the theoretical framework on which they are constructed.

One would expect, therefore, to find that some of the solutions in this "cookbook" would be, if not neutral, counter-productive to the development of good writing. Indeed this is so in the latter half (pp. 60-134). The emphasis is heavy on rhetorical modes of discourse and editorial skills. (Greg Larkin's "Divide and Conquer" most overtly illustrates this emphasis; but the other articles in this half also seem to owe their generation to similar assumptions.) No mention of prewriting, of "dramatizing the object," as James Moffet puts it, of rehearsal, of defining audiences, of selecting appropriate forms of expression. No hint that discovery drafts might be useful or important to the development of a good paper. In fact no serious consideration that perhaps more than one draft and one final copy is needed by most writers in producing a complex piece of writing such as an essay or term paper.

However the first part of the book saves it. Formal acknowledgement of recent research on writing is made in three of the articles: "The Journal: A Practical Option for Teaching Writing" by Thomas R. Moore and Joseph Reynolds; "Journals: Write More — Grade Less" by Jane Zéni Flinn; and "Read the Papers in Class" by Thomas Newkirk. The remaining articles are on the right track both in terms of writing and pedagogy.

My advice regarding this collection of recipes? Try those in the first half of the book; read those in the second half.

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