

Critical-mindedness is said to be important only when there are no ready made answers. But perhaps it is those times when we are most assured of the rightness of our actions and beliefs that introspection is required.

I believe that high school students should have better training in media literacy. As one who teaches media analysis in university, I have to spend a lot of time deconstructing the facticity of the news with students. Once shown, however, students are quick to take up the analysis and apply it to their everyday lives. Another important bias to be found in the media, in terms of teaching about ideology, is that of gender. Unfortunately the authors do not take up how the news is largely constructed by men, to reflect male issues, in a society dominated by male interests.

What the authors are advocating is a return to knowledge-ability, training students to evaluate claims to knowledge made in the media. They bow to reflexivity in saying that the teacher should not indoctrinate students, even in this form of analysis, but should respect a diversity of opinion. There is the intent then that the text should not become simply another item in the corpus to memorize. The authors are saying that in the world and in the classroom there can be a respect of differences that is not relativistic. Students can be trained to seek out the context and history of issues, and to examine how issues are formulated. The skill, of course, is rote, but the desire can not be trained, only inspired.

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**WRITING AND SENSE OF SELF:**

**IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN WRITING WORKSHOPS.**

Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1991.

166 pp. \$14.95; NCTE members \$10.95.

*Writing and Sense of Self* is a broad, bold title, and the implications of this book are also broad and bold. Robert Brooke, with the help of Joy Ritchie (who wrote one chapter and collaborated in the research) argues that understanding how students "negotiate" classroom roles is essential to the work of writing teachers. The concept of negotiating roles stems from social and political theory. The notions of "identity" come mainly from psychology and anthropology, with some intriguing input from imaginative literature. Together, these ideas coalesce into a theory with strong interdisciplinary roots which has rich potential. Almost anyone concerned with the ways human beings behave in groups will benefit from exploring these areas more deeply or from new viewpoints. This book shows how worthwhile the exploration can be.

Put most simply, the book provides a record, both personal and factual, of two college teachers' "conversion" from traditional teacher-centred classrooms to writing workshops. Why, they asked, did we make these changes, and why has our teaching of writing (or facilitating of the process) become so much more successful as a result? In the opening chapter, "Learning and Identity Negotiation," Brooke insists that practice informed by "tacit" theory is often where real innovation occurs. Teachers work all the time with intuitive levels of knowledge, not just explicit principles. Reflecting in order to bring the tacit knowledge into focus can be both a difficult and a rewarding endeavour.

Brooke defines three organizing ideas for a theory of workshop interaction:

1. We can best understand how and what students learn in writing classrooms by focusing on the identity negotiations which occur....
2. Learning to write meaningfully in our culture requires developing an understanding of the self as writer, as someone who uses writing to further personal thinking and to help solve public problems. . . .
3. Classroom practices which promote an understanding of self as writer are likely to "teach" writing more effectively than practices which focus only on expanding writing processes or on internalizing formal rules. (p. 5)

The first chapter begins the discussion of workshop settings which, if they are genuinely open to the students' worlds, are so notably successful. Brooke shows that the familiar question — do we make writing meaningful to the student or the student meaningful to the community? (as Robert Connors phrased it) is a completely false dichotomy. Both must occur together, in productive tension, because the achievement of "voice" in writing is both personal and social.

Chapter 2, "An Overview of Identity Negotiations Theory," provides a rich foundation for the more practical descriptions and analyses that follow. Writers and thinkers as varied as Clifford Geertz, R.D. Laing, Erik Erikson, William Labov, Mary Belenky, and (most influentially) Erving Goffman are brought together in an accessible argument that presents a dynamic model of identity-formation and change. Chapters 3 and 4 then provide criticisms (which are brave and honest, and a delight to read) of earlier courses taught by Brooke and Ritchie. These courses followed sequential and Piagetian programs. Nothing could be more telling than Brooke's reflections on his own earlier self, a self steeped in rhetorical theories of process and audience, but lacking the insight and methods to make them significant to students: "My 1983 course, even though based on sound rhetorical principles, resulted in student

resistance and confusion because the roles made available to students were limited and contradictory” (pp. 27-28). The damaging effects of an inflexible teacher-centred class, inadequately digested educational theory, and (above all) destructive grading schemes become clear.

Chapters 5 and 6 give engaging descriptions of two workshop courses that allowed quite different classroom roles and relationships. The chapter by Joy Ritchie (“Connecting Writers’ Roles to Social Roles beyond the Classroom”) is particularly well-written, and indeed moving, in its case-studies of certain students and their struggles. In the final chapter, also very strong, Brooke does a great deal more than simply sum up what has already been said. Instead he enters a fascinating debate, with detailed examples, on the role-conflicts and resolutions which are features of a writer’s experience. Both the argument and some quotations from the writings of feminists such as Mary Daly and Audre Lorde have the odd feature of being far more gender-sensitive than some earlier parts of the book. It seems that Joy Ritchie’s influence had spread over this chapter from the one before.

The book is particularly valuable in its illustration of the rich pluralism of the classroom, and the need to let that pluralism educate. In a workshop every student becomes an educator of self and others by presenting a unique world-view and set of experiences. At the same time each student engages in a search for “voice” that will allow fuller access to social and professional discourse communities. Instead of agonizing about teacher expectations (and even, like anthropologists, analyzing the mysteries of teacher evaluation-behaviour, an activity which is well illustrated here) students in the workshop can concentrate on a variety of roles as writers – journalist, scientist, inspired poet, autobiographer, or scholar.

The claim that writing workshops allow **genuine** role-definition as writers, escaping the constraints of the institution, is a large one. But it is one that writing teachers who have taken the plunge and given up their “magisterial” role have proved again and again. When students evaluate themselves according to a clear contract, initiate every topic of their writing, discuss their own rough drafts and others’ in small groups in a supportive but disciplined context, and write for a variety of readers, they soon recover from the shock of being given space to **speak**. Once their contribution is recognized, by peers as well as teachers, they become more and more ready to take responsibility for their words. The “privilege” of being listened to and taken seriously, which the teacher and other students can model even for the most uncertain, can begin to seem more like a democratic “right.”

Many of the ideas presented in *Writing and Sense of Self* are well-known. But Brooke and Ritchie have done something unusual in showing,

through their vivid case-studies and personal narratives, the extent to which identity-formation is a complex phenomenon, working from both inside and outside the individual. While society constantly tends to impose roles, some of them stereotypical, on a person, that person also has a profound inner sense of which roles fit and which do not. When a role becomes unbearable, the person will make efforts to throw it off. Role-change (or role-confirmation) is what education is centrally concerned with. This can be seen in the rich discussion of the “underlife” of classroom participants – their individual and human ways of escaping and resisting the curriculum, both overt and hidden, that the institution tries to impose on them. In a successful writing workshop, “underlife” can fuel the discussion as much as conventional behaviour. The psychic energy needed for good writing comes from an engagement of the whole personality, not a merely polite fulfilling of assignments.

In spite of the book’s obvious value for practising teachers and others, however, I found myself wanting the discussion to go further. *Writing and Sense of Self* could have benefited from a clearer look at some dark clouds in what might otherwise be a suspiciously sunny picture.

The major problem is the range of demands made on the teacher in the workshop class. So much depends on the number of students the teacher faces per week, the size of classes, and the politics of the institution. Burn-out is a major danger, because of the requirement that the workshop facilitator remain involved and receptive, adjusting response to individual need. The teacher must know how to negotiate between students hostile to each other, when to challenge and when to encourage. Part therapist, part moral mentor, part artist, part editor, part coordinator, part rhetorician, the workshop leader has a demanding set of roles to play. I would have liked even more discussion of the teacher’s role-negotiation, not just in relation to students but also in relation to colleagues (some hostile), family, friends and other adults. Clearly the teacher, like students, needs a supportive community in order to negotiate these roles successfully.

A second problem is one mentioned but not greatly developed, that is, the workshop’s often anomalous position within institutions that in many cases are still committed to an entirely alien view of the educational process. What if the institution demands, for example, large class sizes, common assignments from all students, grades for each assignment, simple and verifiable acquisition of skills, and so on? Do we expect the writing teacher to become a lone crusader? Do we expect the system itself to adapt? The writing teacher needs to become enough of a critical thinker to challenge the larger structures effectively, perhaps building up a “workshop” of like-minded educators so they can, together, bring about change. Ultimately, this would demand a more openly political approach, one that can explore the extent to which educational theories are also a product of certain social and economic conditions, and of the mental lenses through which we see our world.

In a new book called *The Violence of Literacy* (1991), for example, Elspeth Stuckey argues that in general the teaching of writing has been and still is a profound agent of conformity to social, gender and class norms, not a revolutionary way to break through them. I would have liked Brooke and Ritchie to take their own (apparently liberating) theory of workshop writing further into this difficult issue. What of those students who fail in the workshop class by simply refusing to engage, by not writing; is it enough to say that their sense of self at the time demanded this rejection? How important is it to consider the classroom norms, in a particular place and time, that may make one student feel even more of an outsider in the workshop because of increased exposure to the opinions of the peer-group? What hidden kinds of self-protection in the roles of the teacher and fellow students can actually cause damage?

In the area of gender, for example, attention to works such as Cheri Kramarae's *Women and Men Speaking* (1981) might have helped in some of the case-study analyses; male and female students in a writing workshop are not starting out on as equals where public oral discourse is concerned. This is of particular concern since the way *Writing and Sense of Self* has been published is in itself an unfortunate reaffirmation, no doubt accidental, of the status quo. Joy Ritchie, who seems such an important contributor to the book's thinking, gets no credit in the publishing details, no photograph at the back. Although Robert Brooke is more than generous in his praise of her, she is thus oddly "obscured" as a participant in the enterprise. This says much about our cultural habits and the realities of publishing.

At least, here, the insistence on a variety of writing roles, and a tolerance of difference, shows admirable flexibility and confidence in the creative process itself. Brooke's and Ritchie's detailed critique of their own earlier teaching is wonderfully answered by the descriptions of their workshops in later years. As they show, when positive writer-roles cohere into the teacher's personal "voice," a tremendous new energy and creativity can be released into teaching itself. There is a strong, personal message of encouragement here for other teachers, especially for those struggling to set such a program in place in a hostile or indifferent environment. *Writing and Sense of Self* shows how isolation can be overcome.

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## REFERENCES

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