

# Book Reviews

**Chris M. Anson, Joan Graham, David A. Joliffe,  
Nancy S. Shapiro, Carolyn H. Smith (Editors).  
SCENARIOS FOR TEACHING WRITING :  
Contexts for Discussion and Reflective Practice.  
Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993.  
160 pp. \$16.95.**

Composition is a growth industry. Over the past three decades, there has been a revolution in the teaching of writing at elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education. Universities are instituting (or resurrecting) compulsory writing courses, textbook sales are booming, and the number of journals and conferences dedicated to writing theory, research, and practice is increasing every year. Composition instruction, once a dreary collection of drills, hoary bromides, and formulaic prescriptions, has become an exciting and challenging area of pedagogy. This renewed interest in writing has attracted scholars from other fields, and composition has grown from a service course to a multidisciplinary endeavour.

Unfortunately, along with this growth has come a severe shortage of qualified writing instructors, particularly at the university level. Traditionally, graduate students and junior faculty in English departments have been responsible for writing instruction and, typically, they have received little or no training. Although specialists are beginning to emerge from the handful of North American doctoral programs in composition and rhetoric, the lack of qualified composition teachers remains a major problem for university writing programs. *Scenarios for Teaching Writing* is a response to that problem.

The book "offers six chapters of 'real-world' scenarios about different aspects of teaching writing, each containing issues for discussion"

(p. x). The goal of the book is to help new writing instructors anticipate the types of problems they might encounter when working with students. As a result, the details of classroom "reality" are important to the authors, who devote very little space to the theory or research that supports the practices they describe. At times the book sounds like those docudrama promotions one hears on American television :

...we have assembled these scenarios from actual events that occurred in our own writing programs. . . The sample syllabi, assignments, papers, journal entries, and transcripts of group conferences are all *real*. (pp. x-xi)

The chapters focus on several common concerns of writing teachers: creating assignments; using readings; responding to students; teaching grammar, usage, and style; managing conferences and small groups; and designing courses. Each chapter contains four to six scenarios, and each scenario ends with a series of questions for individual reflection or group discussion. In addition, there is a very helpful bibliography of "professional sources": books and articles of general interest or specific relevance to each of the chapters.

The ideal audience for *Scenarios for Teaching Writing* is a class or seminar for graduate students or new composition instructors. The situations described are the daily fare of writing teachers: the problems of second language students; the conflicts that arise from the cultural, linguistic, and ideological diversity that is common in the contemporary classroom; the assignments that backfire; the offensive journal entries; the unexpected or unproductive responses to evaluation.

The classroom stories have an authentic air, a complexity and perplexity familiar to teachers of writing. The pedagogical disasters they report, though varied, have a common origin: the ambiguous and contradictory relationship between writing teacher and writing student. Is the teacher an expert, a fellow writer, an editor, a mentor, and an arbiter of good taste, style, and political correctness? How can teachers reconcile the student's freedom of thought and expression with their own opinions and values, on the one hand, and the academy's desire for Standard English and adherence to disciplinary norms, on the other hand? *Scenarios for Teaching Writing* does a good job of bringing these dilemmas to life, and for the new teacher of writing it offers a detailed map of the composition classroom's pedagogical minefield.

Unfortunately, the book's helpful and vivid accounts of classroom life are undermined by some less positive features. The many questions that follow each scenario are distracting for the solitary reader, who is not able

to engage in the group discussion that the questions are designed to promote. And many of the stories are left unfinished, their dilemmas unresolved. (What happened, for example, to the teacher who was charged with suppressing free speech when she advised a student not to write an anti-abortion essay?) The book's steady diet of problems might also bother the reader who is looking for activities and assignments that work.

Ideally, writing teachers would gather with colleagues, graduate students, and new teachers within their own institutions to discuss the kinds of situations and concerns that *Scenarios for Teaching Writing* describes. Sadly, this is rarely done. In the absence of such discussions, this book offers valuable insights to the many isolated and unprepared teachers of writing, and should help them discover that they are not alone.

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**Isabelle Knockwood.**

**OUT OF THE DEPTHS : The Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia.**

**Lockeport: Roseway Publishing, 1992.**

**159 pp. \$14.98.**

How could they do this to children?

Isabelle Knockwood writes in the introduction to her book that she began writing stories about her childhood as a way "... to make sense of everything that was wrong about [her] life. . . ." Much of what she wrote dwelt on the time she spent at the Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie. After finishing each story she would destroy it "... so that no one could see it." After moving back to Shubenacadie as an adult she began to interview former students about their experiences at the school. She became a student at Saint Mary's University, and began to rewrite the reminiscences in manuscript form. It is one of the best written books I have ever read.

By now there has been a lot of attention given to the native residential and mission schools run by religious orders in Canada. The media have focussed on the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse native children suffered in those schools. This book details those experiences from the perspective of the children. In the writer's eyes this autobiography is part of the healing from that suffering. The religious orders and the Canadian government have issued apologies, but, as the writer says, they "... can do little to mend the damage caused by the suffering of generations of Native children. . . ."