

## REVIEW

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## RESENSIE

Chubb, Karin, 2007. *A teacher's guide to 'Crossing the line'*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, pp. 134.

As a recently conducted survey into the reading habits of South Africans indicates, people in South Africa do not have a firmly established culture of reading (Jordan, 2007: 8). Transforming high school learners' attitudes to reading could play an important role in changing this. This volume offers a variety of practical and innovative ways of enlivening literature teaching and helping learners to have a positive view of reading.

In *A teacher's guide to 'Crossing the line'*, a widely-used novel on an HIV/AIDS theme, Karin Chubb encourages exploration, and attempts to help teachers avoid the dangers of a determinist thrust. A focus on clearly established goals and a clearly defined route is not conducive to the serendipitous exploration that constructivism encourages. Chubb signals this early on:

This Guide helps you to prepare lessons using the novel, but it is designed to give you maximum freedom in how the novel is taught. Therefore the design is not linear, where you must begin at the beginning, and work steadily to the end.

She also signals the importance of not moving in lockstep:

The [activities] give those who struggle in one area a chance to perform well in another and the chance for all learners in a group to benefit from others' strengths and existing knowledge. (p. 5)

There are seven sections: an introduction, five chapters and appendices.

Although the move to an OBE approach may have many advantages for learners, the increased administrative load means teachers often do not have enough time to prepare lessons adequately. The default position, then, is usually recourse to their own school experiences as learners, and teaching a novel frequently becomes largely a matter of reading around the class. This is rationalised as the only way to ensure that children do actually read the book. Chubb refers to such an approach as a 'lazy' way to teach. A teacher's guide may help bring about change. The emphasis in this book is on encouraging learners to explore the text and respond to the issues raised.

The brief introduction is more of an orientation for teachers than a focus on the book itself. I did not find the first chapter a promising start. The summaries in it seem reminiscent of

College of Careers crammers extensively used during a previous era. Although the author has made it clear that teachers should not work in a linear way, in my view, placing the summaries at this point may encourage teachers to focus too strongly on the content of the book. As Chubb is strongly against making learners write summaries (p.21), her intention here is probably pre-emptive.

Having said that, I would have to concede that the summaries are well written and could also serve as a useful way of mediating the text, particularly when teachers do not have a high level of proficiency in English. Chubb's suggestion that teachers select parts of the summaries to draw up cloze exercises could be a useful way of helping learners to understand the text.. Since many teachers are not *au fait* with cloze testing, it would have been helpful to give one annotated example to illustrate how a cloze can be designed.

The pre-reading suggestions in Chapter 2 (Ways of reading) cover activation of prior knowledge as well as aspects of 'book education' which are a seminal part of a balanced reading approach. Teachers are encouraged to invite learners to become readers, speculating on and anticipating what the text would be about by making inferences based on the cover or title, features of the book such as the use of isiXhosa, as well as snippets from the book. Underlying this is a profound conviction that reading must not be approached as a chore but as an 'exciting journey' (p. 17).

Chubb offers practical suggestions such as ways of helping learners to form a 'roadmap' (p. 18) (noting key features of the book as landmarks along the way) or to do autonomous reading. Her explanatory commentary is tactful and informative – skilful mediation – and weaves the rationale for using these approaches into the suggestions that are made. She does, however, occasionally lapse into a less nuanced, didactic mode. Her unqualified rejection of the use of summaries (p.21), for example, is directed at a particular entrenched practice, but she misses the opportunity to point to other kinds of summaries as valuable: headlines, 'the story thus far' and the two or three liners that TV guides use to describe the content of the next episode of a 'soapy'.

Chapter 3 (Literary aspects) covers structure, plot and subplots, how suspense is created and maintained, characters, use of language (actually the use of isiXhosa), setting, symbols and motifs, fiction and reality, Themba as narrator, descriptions, and creating meaning. I found the exploration of the narrative voice particularly effective. Her approach to this complex issue is to break it up into sub-elements such as actual author and narrative perspective and then to use a question and answer technique. I felt she was less successful in the section on descriptions which tends to invite a rather closed approach:

Chapter 2 [of the novel] includes dense imagery of the night and of the ritual the children witness. Read aloud the similes and metaphors in the first two paragraphs of this chapter and ask the learners to look at the images. The image of how the moon makes the shadows dance is very effective. The descriptions convey the atmosphere of a powerful ritual, whose meaning and importance are discussed later...

Chubb's desire to integrate learning is the reason dealing with themes in the novel in a separate chapter. Here the exploration of themes is integrated with Life Orientation, rather than in conventional literary terms. At the same time she creates space for the kind of individual interpretation that is central to authentic reading. This is probably the reason that

this chapter, the longest in the book, is followed by another chapter on themes. There are 40 activities. This would seem an unrealistic number, but it is consistent with her view that teachers and learners be allowed choice. There are a wide variety of activities, all of which encourage exploration rather than ‘right’ answers.

Chapter 5 mainly uses role play to allow learners to explore the issues of the book more deeply. Activity 5 is an example of the kind of complex exploration that learners are invited to engage in. It involves a dialogue between Mama Zanele and Tatomkhulu, who would not be able to speak freely to children. Here as in the other activities, the worksheet provided by the author frames the dialogue and provides cues.

There is an interview with the author in the second appendix. The format as well as the family snapshot type of picture of the Lutz van Dijk are another effective means of allowing he learners to relate to the book.

Although the comprehensions assessment questions in Appendix A predominantly focus on recall questions (literal comprehension), they also make provision for interpretation and understanding. In explaining the rationale for the questions she has set, Chubb makes a rare slip in describing these recall questions as a means of testing whether learners know the novel (p. 126). What she probably intends is that they know the storyline or superficial content. As she ably demonstrates throughout this teacher’s book, knowing a novel involves deep acquaintance with the plot, character and themes. This can come only through personal engagement with and exploration of the text.

It is often said that the most effective way to change patterns of teaching is to change the approach to examining. I would argue that appropriate in-service teaching education (as opposed to training) is a more desirable route. This comprehensive teacher’s guide is a valuable contribution. Not the least reason is her skilful use of a dialogical mode of address.

## REFERENCE

Jordan, B. 2007. Reading for fun is a closed book to most, *Sunday Times*, 24 June, p. 8.

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