

REVIEW

RESENSIE

Janet Alsup and Jonathon Bush. *'But will it work with REAL students?' Scenarios for Teaching Secondary English Language Arts*. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE. pp. 187.

In recent years there has been increasing interest in producing narratives rather than formal research reports. This is evident in journals such as *Language Identity and Education*. *But will it work with REAL students* works within that idiom. The authors, Janet Alsup and Jonathon Bush, takes a bold approach to pre-service teacher education and by implication to the ongoing development that should underlie lifelong professional development. Their particular concern that pre-service teachers should engage with English language teaching issues within authentic contexts in reaching towards 'best practice'. The term 'best practice' is borrowed from Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde's *Best practice: New standards for teaching and learning in American Schools* (1998).

From their own experience as novice teachers and in their role as mentors to pre-service teachers, those in teacher education will know that seasoned teachers often make scornful remarks about what they see as idealistic theory in pre-service education programmes ('... all very well, but it does not work in the real world'). It is certainly true that students who try to implement theoretically sound ideas in actual classrooms often have disappointing or demoralising experiences. The authors aim in this book to 'bridge the gap between 'good ideas' and classroom practice, between idealistic plans and day-to-day classroom life. For them, this could be achieved through discussion and critical reflection of both 'successes' and 'failures'.

They offer narratives of classroom practice and critical responses to it by other practicing teachers or teacher educators ('we use stories ... to solve professional problems through analysis of "cases" and subsequent reflection and discussion of these stories with colleagues and mentors' (xi)). Alsup and Bush are not in any way concerned to offer definitive answers. Rather they hope these stories will lead to discussion of the central issues in teaching and encourage the development of personal theories and teaching philosophies. For them reflective practice, assumes that a teacher has a core set of beliefs or core philosophical perspective that includes theory and practice.

The book has four chapters which offer teaching vignettes: Chapter 1 focuses on teaching reading and literature; Chapter 2 on teaching writing; Chapter 3 language and grammar; and Chapter 4 Second language learners in the English class. Those working in a South African second language context will regret that Alsup and Bush have not included vignettes featuring speaking and listening.

I am going to pay particular attention to one of the stories in Chapter 1 to illustrate the value of the book in powerfully depicting the benefits of sharing stories and engaging in professional conversations.

I found the approach to classroom practice refreshingly realistic. The authors candidly point to the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the learners and their lack of competence: ‘They will not read the texts we assign or will read them only under duress ... (1). What they suggest has to take account of the realities.

They select five techniques to illustrate good practice with regard to reading and literature teaching: literature circles, reading workshops, modelling of reading and comprehension processes, integration of multiple types of texts and use of diverse texts. Reading workshops seemed to me to hold particular promise for teachers wanting to exercise the freedom that they have within an OBE approach. At present, it seems to me that OBE privileges uniformity and ironically more focus on literature/reading as ‘study’ of content.

Reading workshops entail allowing students to select their own books and read them at their own pace. As part of the process, they write in response to a set of guidelines created by the teacher. Literature circles are similar in allowing students to select the books. However, in literature circles the students work as a group to make decisions related to the book they will read, the rate at which they will read it, how discussion will be conducted and the overall approach they will take.

In South Africa there is often a divide between those who think that prescribed books should be chosen from classical literature and those who advocate young adult literature. There is also a tendency to take binary positions on close reading and a reader-response approach. Here the authors demonstrate the merits of combining approaches.

The first story recounts a teacher’s approach to *Huckleberry Finn*, a book often associated with an ‘issues’ approach. He decided that he wanted to encourage positive responses:

There is more than enough conflict, whether in fiction or real life, to write about, I thought; too many young writers, when invited to share their feelings, share stories of pain and struggle. While these stories provide a valuable and sometimes necessary outlet and certainly have their place, I wanted to encourage positive responses. (12).

Students were asked to explore these two questions:

Where is your “river”? Where do you feel like Huck does, peaceful and happy and “comfortable”?

Students responded in ways which showed that they had their places that made them feel at peace. Thus this could be viewed as a success story.

Two responses are given. The first commends the teacher for finding a clear point of intersection between the river and the students’ lives. The respondent then suggests ways in which the activity could have been taken further, moving into deeper analysis and even ‘social-cultural’ criticism:

[D]iscussion could focus on how or why Huck does a similar thing. What are Huck’s problems? To what extent are they considered by or reflected in the time in which this fictional character is living?...What happens when Huck and Jim leave the raft?

Here the respondent's suggestions reflect a view of literary study as beginning with response (making personal connections and giving opinions), moving on to analysis and interpretation and finally arriving at (social-cultural) criticism.

The second respondent highlights the process towards becoming more sophisticated readers. Students are engaged in considering issues Twain thought about and then making new meanings. For the teacher a next step could be to explore the connections between this text and other works of literature or films. Examples mentioned here are Harriet Beecher Stowe's treatment of the Ohio River in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (15). If one were to include film, *A river runs through it* could enrich the exploration of social mores.

At the end of the discussion by the respondents, those using the book are invited by the authors to engage in further discussion. In the questions they pose, they return to the central issues raised in this section such as the role of personal response/personal connection and whether or not encouraging positive responses or reading 'positive' text is important for adolescents and finally what adult novels could be paired with *Huckleberry Finn*. Learning Activities follow. I thought the second one was particularly useful for the development of a personal philosophy of literature teaching:

Draw a diagram that represents your philosophy of teaching literature and include the following approaches from which to address or analyze a text: personal response, historical background information, author's biographical information, social-cultural critique or criticism (i.e., issues of gender, class, race/ethnicity) and close readings of the language of texts. In this diagram, show which of these you think is the most important to teaching or approaching a text by giving it more space, and then visually demonstrate the importance you place on the others in a similar way. Then share this diagram of your literature teaching philosophy with peers or colleagues and talk about your philosophical similarities and differences.

I felt that Chapter 4 was not as strong as the first three chapters. This is probably because South African teacher education programmes emphasise second language teaching rather than seeing it as a Cinderella. Nevertheless, the chapter does offer a useful summary of some of the key issues.

Chapter 5 is ambitious in tackling three such complex issues (professional issues of management and discipline, technology and testing)

In the Conclusion, the authors describe how narrative action research can be used as part of reflexive praxis. They give a simple, clear yet accurate description of narratology and narrative research and teacher action research ideal for those starting out on this kind of research. I thought they were particularly successful in interpreting the ethical issues.

I found the book very stimulating. It could make an important contribution to innovation in teacher education and to classroom practice in South Africa – especially if it stimulates those engaged in similar 'professional conversations' to tell their stories.

REFERENCES

ZEMELMAN, S, H DANIELS & AA HYDE. 1998. *Best practice: New standards for teaching and learning in American Schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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