Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice

George Hillocks, Jr.

George Hillocks Jr. is a professor in the Department of Education and the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, where he is also Director of the Mast of Arts in Teaching/English Program. (back cover) This book looks closely at writing specifically in the classroom and what is involved in order to effectively teach writing at secondary education and early college levels. Hillocks argues that while research and theory about writing are important, all activities must be specific and applicable to the group of students you are teaching. Therefore, Teaching Writing as a Reflective Practice contains theory, research, and a lot of personal classroom experiences and practical knowledge. This book is also not one that needs to be read in chronological order; you can pick the chapters most applicable to you and your needs as a teacher. I am including the chapter titles because I think they are helpful in understanding exactly what type of resource this is.

Chapter Breakdown
1: A View of Writing and Students
2. Some Basics for Thinking about Teaching Writing
3. Integrating Theories for Teaching Writing
4. Environments for Active Learning: A Vygotskian Perspective
5. The Composing Process: A Model
6. The Writer’s Repertoire: Inquiry and Discourse
7. The Art of Planning I: Some Basics
8. The Art of Planning II: Inventing Gateway Activities
9. The Art of Planning III: Sequencing
10. Reflection in Planning and Teaching
11. A Summation

Favorite Hillocks quotes:
“A central argument of this book is that writing lies at the heart of education when it is connected to inquiry and when inquiry is in the hands of the students, who themselves construct, exchange, test and revise interpretations in dialectical processes. Writing is a chief means of extending, shaping and rethinking that inquiry and carrying on the dialectical processes involved.” (212)
“When students make gains as writers, the gains are likely to affect other educational endeavors. And for teachers, the joy of seeing students create some new part of themselves, and do it well, washes the difficulties to insignificance and provides the impetus to try, like the Bruce’s unrelenting spider, again, and again and again.” (217)
Talking in Class: Using Discussion to Enhance Teaching and Learning

“The teachers would have to admit having some doubts about knowing a definitive answer to the question and would facilitate discussion with an authentic openness to exploring possibilities and testing claims” (p. 3).

What is Authentic Discussion?

- Authentic discussion is dialogic, while recitation, the dominant mode of instruction in the English classroom, is monologic (p.3).
- Authentic prompts “ask the participants in the discussion to identify a series of behaviors and interpret them in some logical fashion. The question invites speculation and encourage several participants to join the inquiry” (p. 3).
- Typically, authentic discussion is found in upper-level classes, despite the fact that it is beneficial for students of all ability levels (p. 4).

Authentic Discussion in Large Groups

- Framing questions for discussions
  o “Ideally all the questions [asked to students] are not basic recall of explicitly stated information” (p. 11).
  o “In many situations, it would be especially useful to pose questions that solicit debatable opinions and invite multiple perspectives” (p. 11).
  o Don’t be afraid to rephrase a question if necessary, and always ask appropriate follow-up questions (p. 16).
- Students should be prepared for the discussion through pre-reading activities such as writing and discussions with partners (p.14-15).
- Allow students time to process and give a response past “I don’t know” (p. 16).
- Defer praise to avoid students answering questions with the intent of getting the correct answers from the teacher’s mind (p. 14).

Authentic Discussions in Small Groups

- First: Create a safe environment.
  o “It is crucial, then, that the teacher is influential in creating a classroom environment that encourages the participation of everyone and provides a reasonable guarantee that contributors will be treated with respect” (p. 36).
- Second: Establish group membership.
  o “When matters are left to chance, the possibility remains for some less-productive groups to form” (p. 37).
  o Instead, focus on promoting heterogeneity by ensuring groups have a mix of genders, races, student groups (i.e. athletes, musicians, etc.), and a range of shy and outgoing students (p. 38).
- Third: Direct the formation, location, and proximity of all groups.
- Fourth: Set the small-group task.
  o “Students needs to know that there is something tangible to be accomplished during the course of group meetings” (p. 40).
- Fifth: Outline the group procedures.
- Sixth: Monitor group behavior.
  o “It is appropriate for the teacher to sit briefly with a group to contribute to the discussion and judge the nature of the discussion without taking up permenant residence and ignoring the rest of the class.
- Seventh: Evaluate the groups’ dynamics and individual performances
- Last: Bring the conversations to closure

“The students and I are the most powerful forces in the classroom, not the tests” (Kittle 4).

Main Ideas:

● A focus on the process of writing will ensure the creation of a quality product. Give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.
● In order to teach writing, a teacher must be willing to deny expertise and become a writer him or herself. When you write yourself, you will realize what needs to be taught.
● You cannot tell students how to write. You must show them the process and walk alongside them as they go through it.
● As students begin to learn how to write, they should be allowed to write about what they know. A mastery of the subject will enable them to manipulate and develop their writing without risking an unclear topic.
● Study text should be used to explore the formal elements of writing; however, this study is only valuable when the students simultaneously consider how they can apply these techniques to their own pieces.

Classroom Application: Potential Writing Unit Outline

1. Teacher model the writing process with a piece of their own work that is in progress. Show the writing process rather than telling it to students.
2. Students begin to write a snapshot moment recounting an incident of their choosing.
3. Students read study text from the perspective of a writer, taking note of formal elements. When they notice these formal elements of the study pieces, students should consider how they might be applied to their own writing.
4. Students experiment on their snapshot with the discovered formal techniques. They share their work with students and receive feedback during this process.
5. Repeat steps 3 and 4 for a story that covers a few scenes.
6. Repeat steps 3 and 4 for a narrative that explores a theme.
7. Throughout the process of writing new pieces (the story and the narrative), students continue to revise old pieces. Ultimately, the student will have a completed portfolio of multiple pieces.
Write Beside Them: Risk, Voice, and Clarity in High School Writing  
By Penny Kittle

Why should teachers write along with students?
1. Teachers are great models for students because teachers often experience the same hesitations, insecurities, and struggles in their writing as their students do.
2. Great works of literature and other valuable texts are examples and models of the product of writing, but not the process. Teachers can serve as great examples of the writing process for their students.
3. When teachers are active writers, they are in the writing mindset and more aware of the writing process. Because of this, they will be more aware of what they need to teach their students and how they can teach it.

The Writer’s Notebook Format
1. Quick write – write for about five minutes about one of a number of topics or prompts (writing).
2. Reread the quick write and select words or phrases with potential for expansion (rereading/rethinking).
3. Write one idea from step two on a new sheet of paper and write about it (expanding).

Quick Write Rules
1. Write the entire time without stopping, which is usually several minutes.
2. Write quickly without editing or censoring your writing while in the act of writing.
3. Relax, have fun, and play with your writing. Allow your voice to develop and emerge.

Daily Class Schedule Template  
(* Each component is discussed in depth with examples in the chapters of the book.)
1. Daily Agenda: the big idea  
2. Silent sustained reading: book talk and free reading  
3. Quick writes and notebook work: experimenting with writing  
4. Minilessons: mentor texts; teacher’s process in a particular genre; rehearsal, revision, and rereading; or grammar and sentence structure  
5. Writing workshop: independent work and teacher conferences  
6. Closing: sharing best writing, lines, or ideas

Progression of Writing Products for a Course
1. Snapshot/Moment: slow down writing to focus on a particular instance  
2. Narrative: incorporate different skills and techniques into a story  
3. Extended Narrative: themed story with broader scope and improved quality  
4. Argument: make a claim, provide evidence, and expand upon thinking  
5. Commentary/Op-Ed: logical support of a claim through subtle writing  
6. Fiction: explore an idea, condition or belief through story  
7. Multi-genre Research: examine a big idea through multiple frames  
8. Final Portfolio: annotate semester’s work, demonstrate skills, and review/evaluate semester’s reading and writing

**Fresh Takes on Teaching Literary Elements: How to Teach What Really Matters About Character, Setting, Point of View, and Theme**  
Michael W. Smith & Jeffery D. Wilhelm

**Purpose:** This book provides students the tools they need to write and express themselves creatively, with a focus on making learning these subjects engaging and interesting. Smith and Wilhelm aim to create a deep understanding and appreciation for literacy without pushing students away from the subject with ineffective teaching strategies.

**Principles:** Smith and Wilhelm open with a chapter that introduces their principles. These principles include explaining the purpose of your activities to students, allowing your students to reach their own conclusions, teaching in a way so the information sticks, linking new information to old information to create a long-lasting schema, providing opportunities to feed off of peers and have discussions, and finally, making sure to connect reading and writing.

**What’s Inside:** 4 important literary elements are presented and are then followed by two chapters of “Putting Theory Into Practice” which focus primarily on activities and draws briefly from a variety of different books.

- **Characters**
  - Examples of activities: taking a personality test as a character, holding a press conference as a character, and acting out the body language of a character

- **Context**
  - Examples of activities: writing about paintings and photographs, seeing how different moods affect the story, and using graphic organizers

- **Point of View**
  - Examples of activities: ranking characters on a reliability continuum, retelling a familiar story, and examining changing points of view in TV shows and movies

- **Themes**
  - Examples of activities: using fables, making collages, and drawing comics

**Highlights for teachers:**

- This book clearly explains the thought process behind each activity. This is also very helpful when explaining your rationale to your students.
- When each literary element is introduced, the authors start out with a very basic description of what the term is and then move on to a more complex analysis of the research and theory behind each element. The research the authors present allowed me to expand my knowledge while still connecting it to the material.
- It stresses personal reflection and connecting back to your own experience, which allows you to connect with your students and provide more relevant instruction.
Fresh Takes on Teaching Literary Elements: How to Teach What Really Matters About Character, Setting, Point of View, and Theme

Michael W. Smith & Jeffrey D. Wilhelm

I. Teaching Characters
   a. Theory
      i. Students must apply character traits to a more holistic impression of the character
      ii. Students must fight first impressions as the “right” impression
      iii. Students must see the character as an individual as well as part of a group
   b. Strategies
      i. Silly and serious personality tests
      ii. Simulated texts such as personal ads (i.e. craigslist roommate ad), portraits
      iii. Visual media clips (i.e. Fresh Prince of Bel-Air)
      iv. Writing prompts: autobiographical writing, in-role writing, press conference questions
      v. Literary Characters’ Value Profile; 22 values such as “acceptance” or “wealth” ranked

II. Teaching Setting
   a. Theory
      i. Setting occurs at a micro, meso, and macro level
      ii. Setting may be physical, temporal, social, or psychological
   b. Strategies
      i. Paintings, photographs, and picture books evaluated for all dimensions of setting
      ii. Quick writes that emphasize “specific and limited” language to reveal setting
      iii. Drama, role-play, writing with stage directions
      iv. Visual media
      v. Students cast as ethnographers of a text

III. Teaching Point of View
   a. Theory
      i. Students must access credibility of narrator’s voice and opinion of audience
      ii. Students must assess whether the narrator is being explicit or if we have to infer ideas
      iii. Students must actively decide if they want to embrace or resist the narrator’s ideas
   b. Strategies
      i. Practice dramatizing narrators
      ii. Use short excerpts to rate a narrator’s reliability
      iii. Writing prompt: students write same story (i.e. Cinderella) from multiple P.O.V.
      iv. Pop culture material: TV shows, music, and film

IV. Teaching Theme
   a. Theory
      i. Students must place the text themes into ongoing and modern cultural conversations
      ii. Students must apply transactional strategies/understand author choice as deliberate
      iii. Students must be comfortable to discuss theme and subsequently accept, adapt or resist it
   b. Strategies
      i. Connect textual themes to students’ personal lives
      ii. Use Fables, where themes are often more clear cut and simplistic
      iii. Alternative assessments: collages, timelines, paintings, and photos that represent theme
      iv. Practice classifying comics by subgenre and theme
      v. Picture Mapping

Smith, M. W., & Wilhelm, J. D. (2010). Fresh takes on teaching literary elements: How to teach what really matters about character, setting, point of view, and theme. Scholastic.
**The Dynamics of Writing Instruction: A Structured Process Approach**

**Principles of a Structured Process Approach (p. 21):**
- Students develop composition procedures in relation to particular writing tasks
- Teachers identify criteria needed to assess writing in given genres for given audiences
- Students learn procedures through accessible tasks and gradually apply them to more complex tasks
- Composing is a highly social act; small groups are essential
- People learn to write by talking, as well as by writing
- Models should be avoided; attention to ideas comes before attention to forms
- Assessments involve students applying learned procedures to new tasks

**How to Implement a Structured Process Approach:**
- Analyze class tasks and activities to ensure they scaffold toward specific goals
- Identify “real world” problems to provide specific purposes and audiences
- Sequence activities so that they progress from most accessible to most complex
- Plan for structured discussion to encourage collaborative planning and revising
- Incorporate reflection components to foster metacognition and scaffold skill transfer

**Example of a Structured Process Sequence: Teaching Comparison and Contrast Essays**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Composition Procedure Goals</th>
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| 1. Talk about similarities and differences between two radio stations, two fast-food restaurants, two athletes, etc. | -Identify points of comparison and contrast
| 2. In small groups, students select two things to compare on their own    | -Categorize each item in relation to points of comparison and contrast
| 3. Small groups defend their value judgment to the class                  | -Create priorities among points of comparison and contrast
| 4. Students read three essays comparing and contrasting two breakfast cereals | -Make a value judgment
| 5. Students create a rubric for evaluation                                | -Students discuss and generate evaluation criteria for specific audiences
| 6. In small groups, students write an essay using the comparison and contrast points for their two items | -Students use criteria to evaluate comparison and contrast essays
| 7. Language lesson: combining sentences using subordinating conjunctions | -Students think and write collaboratively
| 8. Using two sources selected by the teacher, students find facts about two bands they may not be familiar with | -Students learn how to use language appropriate for comparison/contrast essays
| 9. Students state a preference for which concert of the two bands they will attend | -Students learn how to find information unfamiliar topics
| 10. Students write a reflection on the process                            | -Students incorporate facts from sources as evidence for a value judgment
|                                                                          | -Students become aware of procedures needed for comparison and contrast essays

Two Premises for Building Real-World Writers

1. Introduce young writers to real-world discourse
2. Provide students with extensive teacher and real-world models

6 Purposes of Writing

1. **Express and Reflect**
   - combination of the student’s personal experiences and how these experiences have shaped the student and affected his/her future
   - example prompts:
     a) Memoir Tweets- 140 character stories expressing students’ experiences
     b) Favorite Mistake- reflect on a time when you made a mistake, good or bad

2. **Inform and Explain**
   - moving beyond the “how to” paper to topics of real-world significance
   - example prompts:
     a) How Does ____ Work
     b) College Collage- research a college and report findings on all of the different aspects

3. **Evaluate and Judge**
   - making comparisons between various different ideas or products and making a judgment about which is best and why
   - example prompts:
     a) Comparison Charts- students create charts comparing different aspects of three different products of the same kind and use this to write an essay
     b) Evaluate an Ad- students evaluate a print ad utilizing propaganda techniques to uncover hidden meaning

4. **Inquire and Explore**
   - can be used to teach students to question and think, but do not necessarily need to have an end goal or argument in mind
   - example prompts:
     a) “Why” Activity- students receive random sentences from a newspaper and must explain why something might have happened or might be

5. **Analyze and Interpret**
   - “to gain a better understanding of a person, place, phenomenon or thing” (pg. 142)
   - example prompts:
     a) Who Is to Blame- students must take and back up a stance on who or what is to blame for a societal or literary issue

6. **Take a Stand/ Propose a Solution**
   - argumentative format that causes students to stand up for an issue and propose what can be done
   - example prompts:
     a) 5 Things You Can Do To ____- have students create a list of 5 solution to a problem (broad or narrow)

How to Utilize the 6 Purposes

- Have students choose one topic and write focus 5 minutes on each of the six different purposes
- Students then select one appealing quick-write, revise it and create a full essay out of their ideas
The Digital Writing Workshop
Troy Hicks

The purpose of this book is to fill the void left between principles of teaching writing and the increase in digital literacies. Hicks integrates the writing workshop with new technologies including blogs, wikis, social networks, podcasts, and digital stories. The format of the book begins with 1) an explanation of the writing workshop, 2) the assimilation of the writing workshop with digital literacies, given the changing relationship between reader, writer, and text, and 3) and finally, a look at assessment and what it means to be a teacher in the digital age.

Enabling writing skills with Digital Tools:

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) and Blogs
- Encourage students to subscribe to feeds of their interest based on essential questions of their choice.
- Update blogs based on new findings
- Organize with social bookmarking

Conferring and Collaboration Online
- Time to think and reflect on writing before giving comments
- Revision happens in concurrence to digital uploads, thus involving the student and teacher in the revising process
- Online availability of assignments for all students to respond
- Collaboration through class wikis

Revision
- Collaborative word processors and deep revision over a variety of texts
- Students and teachers can offer feedback through comments, different font colors, striking through text, and highlighting
- The word processor archives each change/revision in the document’s history

Composing and Publishing
- Examine craft through MAPS: Mode (Media), Audience, Purpose, and Writing (p. 55)
- Creating and composing photo-essays with online photo sharing
- This I Believe podcasts
This book is an introduction into the way multigenre assignments can be incorporated into writing pedagogy. Romano, a former secondary school teacher writes about this strategy that shaped his writing pedagogy and why he believes it is extremely important for other teachers to incorporate. He argues that multigenre instruction allows students to build more connections with the outside world and exposes them to all of the opportunities writing has to offer outside of the expository essay.

Throughout the book, Romano gives samples of student work, ideas to use in class as well as his personal thoughts on multigenre work. This concept for teaching is so new to most people but Romano explains it thoroughly and gives a sample multigenre paper to reinforce his ideas.

The content in this book is organized as such:

- History and sample of multigenre writing in school
- How to prepare students for writing multigenre papers and set up assignments
- Gives examples of different genres and subgenres that may be included in the papers
- Highlights three components of the papers: beginnings, golden threads, and endnotes
- How to grade the papers

Some of the genres mentioned in this book are:

- Expository writing
- Narrative
- Poetry
- Prose poetry
- Flash fiction
- Dreams
- Stream of conscious
- Graphics (tables, charts, etc.)

Romano emphasizes the importance of thoughtful research when having an assignment such as a multigenre paper. Sources, like the paper itself, are diverse in genre type and expose students to a wealth of material. Topics should come about organically and the whole purpose of multigenre papers is to allow students to spend a significant portion of time researching and thinking about their topic. One of the quotes that is on the cover of the book reads:

“The curious thing about the writing process with multigenre is that it can be difficult to know where you’re going until you’re already there. Multigenre takes time. Ideas and stories and themes need to marinate.”

This abbreviated version of Romano’s stance reminds us that as teachers, we need to allow students to take time to write and to write about the things that inspire them, not only in an expository way but in the form of creative writing, poetry, drama and more.
**Grammar Rants:**
*How a Backstage Tour of Writing Complaints Can Help Students Make Informed, Savvy Choices About Their Writing*

By: Patricia A. Dunn and Ken Lindblom
Summary Prepared By: Lindsay Schneider

**Premise:**

- Teachers cannot make traditional grammar instruction the center of their lessons
- If writers or speakers are made to believe that their language choices reflect their intelligence, it’s no wonder that many students are reluctant to speak in class or to produce much writing (25)
- On teaching writing: “novice writers should not receive patronizing pats on the head for sloppy work. Instead, they need readers to engage with their ideas, to take what they’re saying seriously, to tell them what’s working and what they need to work on…Yes, young writers should be encouraged to be careful proofreaders, but they should not be humiliated when they miss something minor.” (36)

**What is a grammar rant?**

- A published or spoken complaint about other people’s language use, but it is rarely about sophisticated aspects of writing
- The problem with grammar rants is that they increase pressure on writing instructors to cover grammar traditionally – even if teaching grammar in conventional ways doesn’t help students write or speak better (x)
- Grammar rants are most often about those whose language is being critiqued – ranters make serious and damaging implications about the moral character or intelligence of those who use grammar incorrectly

**How can teachers teach grammar? Analyze grammar rants**

- Analyze grammar rants – “doing so will first of all draw students’ attention to what ever editing detail the ranter is fretting about, so that they can avoid that problem.
- Allow students to unpack the connotations of grammar rants so they can get a simultaneous bird’s eye view and close-up view of language controversies without being involved

Won’t this confuse students? No!

- Students will be able to pay attention to language and what is being said about it
- It allows them to build knowledge and authority

“Yes, students need to know ‘grammar rules’ to the extent that those rules can help them compose and proofread successful writing. But they also need a desire to write and some modicum of hope they’ll be successful at it. … When students acquire the background in language to judge the judges, they will learn much about that language. They will also learn to analyze text, to evaluate claims, and to think critically.” (96)