



# Spreading the Word

## The Art of Writing about Teaching

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I.

I had grown by coming there and trying to do whatever I could. And they had written more and more beautifully, well, and unforgettably.

—June Jordan, from *Journal of a Living Experiment*

When I consider the art of writing about teaching, I have to acknowledge that the books that have influenced me most as a teacher have been those that have influenced me most as a writer. That is to say, the books are less about describing a series of imitable lessons and more about engaging the reader in creative and meaningful ways.

I don't mean to dismiss books that provide prescriptive exercises, I just find them less inspiring than books which, while very possibly including lessons, challenge the reader to think about the knowledge and experience he or she brings to the work at hand. The issue here is that if a teacher simply copies a lesson, what's often not examined is the *why* of the lesson, the meaning and relevance for the teacher and students. A teacher who approaches poetry as an unintegrated and specific unit in the curriculum is missing the power that poetry can have when it is thoughtfully taught throughout the year and across the curriculum.

Many of the good books on teaching writing offer lessons, but what makes them good is how they help the reader think about the process. Kenneth Koch's in-depth introduction to *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* is a case in point. In describing how he chose the poems, the interactions of the teaching, the challenges and questions, Koch reminds us that this teaching is not necessarily just about the product—the final poems the young people write—but the process that leads to the writing of them. It's not about tricking anyone to produce something. Rather it's to see why writing poetry can be pleasurable, difficult, exciting.

## 11.

No matter how much I had expected, these results were surprising, suggesting, as they did, the probable universality of the power—still sadly unrecognized—of the children’s imagination and intelligence.

—Kenneth Koch, from *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*

I started reflecting on the art of “Writing about Teaching Writing” last winter when T&W invited me to participate in a panel at the Associated Writing Program’s annual meeting. The panel included people who have been thinking about teaching writing for some time: Phillip Lopate, Marv Hoffman, and Terry Blackhawk. As part of our preparation, Publications Director Chris Edgar asked us to compile a list of excellent texts on the subject of teaching creative writing (see page 33). What strikes me is the interesting balance of books we came up with: some focussed specifically on creative writing pedagogy, while others manifested far more subtle relationships to the subject at hand. The latter dealt with teaching but tended to situate the act of teaching (and writing) within a larger political, social, literary, and educational context.

Some of the books were what you might call the “usual suspects”: Kenneth Koch’s *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, Herbert Kohl’s *36 Children*, and Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s *Teacher*. These are classics that belong on the bookshelf of anyone who teaches. The presence of *Third Mind*, edited by Tonya Foster and Kristin Prevallet, might come as a surprise to some people due to its newcomer status. A marvelous collection of essays by such writers as bell hooks, Anne Waldman, and Marjorie Welish on the connection between the visual arts and the written word, *Third Mind* is multidisciplinary not only in its subject matter but also in its very style. The essays are each written utilizing a distinct approach—theoretical, historical, practical—making the book a virtual anthology of modes of writing about teaching.

The selection of *The Art of the Personal Essay* (edited by Phillip Lopate) was particularly instructive, because Lopate manages to discuss very clearly and articulately the salient formal and thematic qualities of the personal essay, while at the same time revealing how the personal essay can function as a mode of being and thinking. I am a great admirer of works that show us the relevance a literary form can have beyond the classroom, as a life tool.

*Journal of a Living Experiment*, which Lopate also edited, recounts the first ten years of Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Anne Sexton and June Jordan’s teaching diaries alone make this book important: the reflections on the early struggles and successes of these two major poets as they taught young people mirror the experiences of many new (and not so new) teachers of writing today. In her journal entries, Jordan raises political questions, which are echoed in one of the other recommended books: Lisa Delpit’s *Other People’s Children* (1995). The continuity of concerns is telling. Written almost two decades later, Delpit’s work has little to say about teaching writing, but *a lot* to say about teaching when it comes to questions about race and class.

Her concerns with the politics and practice of teaching, in particular with respect to those who refuse to consider color and economics in schooling, are significant for the teacher/writer who, in asking students to write about themselves in the world, must understand the students and the world they live in. Delpit's work is also notable in its critique of fellow progressives who fail to question their own privileged position in the classroom and society.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, like Delpit's work, is not necessarily directly concerned with writing, but his rejection of "banking education" (in which the teacher transfers or deposits a specific body of knowledge into the student's memory bank) and his constructive vision of a more engaged, collaborative process are ultimately pertinent to any classroom. Freire's emphasis on teaching that is liberatory and about the humanization of the student strike me as essential themes for anyone thinking about writing. This seems particularly important now when national educational goals (read here: No Child Left Behind) seem more linked to standardized testing and self-serving (false) morality than they do to genuine creative and critical intellectual growth.

Interestingly, several autobiographies made the list: Myles Horton's *The Long Haul*, Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams*, and John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. This makes sense: these books are engagingly and eloquently written and they are stories of learning, of process, of watching individual lives sketched across historical times. Horton's is one I've found particularly fascinating. *The Long Haul* reads like an alternate history of the United States, defining the 20th century not so much by wars but by movements: labor, civil rights, anti-war.

What does it say about the teaching of writing, that such a vast range of books from different cultures, centuries, genres, and schools of thought should be considered crucial by contemporary thinkers in the field? Firstly, I think that education, while often seen by society through the narrow lens of political and bureaucratic decisions, is actually a field that (much like literature itself) is constantly reassessing itself, constantly drawing on the best thinking that has been done and transforming it into action. Moreover, it suggests that writing about this work as part of that assessment and transformation is a significant part of the documentation and process involved.

### III.

Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking.

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

There are certain qualities in writing about teaching writing that are important to consider, especially if this writing includes lessons. One thing I look for is the rationale for the lesson: Is the context for it clear? We should know why the writer thought the lesson was important, in terms of the writer's own work

and interests and in terms of what the students wanted and/or needed. The writer should be clear not only about the planning of the lesson but how the lesson was taught, from the introduction to the conclusion, including any follow-up. An important part of the documentation of the lesson is the student responses. These obviously include student writing—often the high point of the writing about teaching writing—but can also include a sense of how the students responded to the lesson, their comments, questions, ideas, and feelings about what happened. The writing should include, too, the writer's own reflections on what happened and why. Here a clear consideration is what John Dewey spoke of as the need for continuity in the educative experience. That is, can the student, teacher, and writer not only talk about what happened in the lesson, but can they also see the connection (or disconnection) with what they have done before and what they will do next? For Dewey, the question of how an experience prepares one for the next experience was a crucial one.

Finally, writing about teaching writing should itself embody some of the best qualities of good, instructive writing. It should be clear, direct, specific. Narratives should be straightforward and descriptive. The reader should feel as though she or he is there, whether as witness or as an integral part of the process. And, in writing about teaching writing, one should be sure to style a little. After all, good writing is supposed to keep the reader reading to the last word and returning again and again.