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Review of *Real-World Writers: A Handbook for Teaching Writing with 7-11 Year Olds by Ross Young and Felicity Ferguson*

There is much to commend in this readable, nicely illustrated guide to teaching writing 'with' 7-11 year olds. Its laudable aim is to encourage 'the whole class to see themselves as apprentice writers who every day write together in what feels like a combination of a creative writers' workshop and a serious, professional publishing house' and to ensure 'children feel part of an authentic writing community where together they learn about the writer's craft and the processes writing goes through, which genres best serve their purposes, and how grammar words as a tool to enhance what it is they want to say' (p.3). In order to do this, the book is structured into two parts: Part A, which lays out the principles and techniques of developing 'real-world' writers, and Part B, which explores the ways in which poetry, memoir, narrative, non-fiction, persuading and influencing, and history writing might be taught.

At the heart of the pedagogy is the principle of encouraging 'writing for pleasure', an approach which the authors have published another book on -- A Writing For Pleasure pedagogy: theory, research and practice (Routledge 2021) -- and also have a website devoted to: https://writing4pleasure.com/about-us/
This pedagogy is not necessarily about children feeling that they must enjoy writing, although this is not discounted, but rather it is about getting them to feel and believe that their writing fulfils a purpose, is responded to, discovering their own voice and sharing what they feel proud of (p. 8). The emphasis upon pleasure develops an idea first promoted by Teresa Cremin and other researchers with regards to reading. Their Open University Reading for Pleasure website (https://ourfp.org/) is truly a wonder, stuffed full of great research and resources. Looking back over the website made me speculate about whether writers ever really 'write for pleasure' in the way readers do; it seems to me that writing is a different beast entirely, we write to express ourselves, to explore our thoughts, to vent etc, but do we ever actually sit down and say, 'Hey I'm going to feel some pleasure now and write?' The injunction to find writing pleasurable made me recall the philosopher Zizek's critique of late capitalism and its insistence that we have to enjoy life, and how this implicit dictat actually kills our enjoyment.

The book discusses 'effective practice' at some length, claiming that the advice is 'what the research says'. It's important to note the recommendations in this book are compelling summaries of the authors' interpretations of diverse research, most of which is not 'scientific' as the book claims, but qualitative in nature.

Understanding the emphasis which the authors place upon certain approaches is important to consider. While the idea of creating a community of writers is central to book – an idea promulgated by leading researchers/practitioners in the field such as the aforementioned Professor Cremin, Simon Wrigley and Jeni Smith among many others – it is not until Chapter 15 that there is a 'guide to becoming a writer-teacher' (p. 135). It is worth looking at the website of the National Writing Project (NWP) to consider the issue of emphasis here: https://www.nationalwritingproject.uk/ The NWP, which Wrigley & Smith have been instrumental in running, puts the concept of the teacher-writer at the very heart of writing pedagogy. Learning to teach how to write starts with teachers writing for themselves; the community of writers in a classroom grows out of the teacher sharing their passion, their reflections for writing. As the authors of the book say, 'There is no way of helping children to see themselves as writers if you yourself after not interested in it…Teachers who are not themselves members of their class writing community cannot effectively model how to be part of it' (p. 135). Why is this point left until so late on in the book?

The book tries to avoid being prescriptive about whether there are certain preferred ways of writing: 'there is no single agreed-upon writing process, nor is there a single set of strategies that all writers like or find effective' (p. 47). Instead of saying that there is a set way to write – one of the problems of the old National Literacy Strategy -- the book advocates teaching certain writing processes such as generating ideas, planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing/performing. It encourages teachers to set 'process goals' which are appropriate to the child or class such as 'over the next couple of writing sessions, you will need to have a plan for your instructional text ready'.

The book is prescriptive about how teachers should structure writing lessons however: 'a typical writing lesson should be split into three parts: a mini-lesson, writing time and class sharing. Writing session begin with a mini-lesson – a lesson that is short, wholly practical and of long-term use to the apprentice writers in your class' (p. 63). The mini lesson should either be a 'writing study' lesson or a 'functional grammar study. Writing study lessons should ideally focus on an aspect of the writer's craft or how to use a specific resource or writing strategy. Functional grammar study is about children understanding how they already use grammar and punctuation in their projects in powerful ways, as well as how they can learn new aspects of grammar...'(p. 64). While these two concepts are not referenced, I assume the evidence base for the 'grammar' approach is taken from the University of Exeter's Grammar for Writing research, which was spearheaded by Professor Deborah Myhill. It's worth noting that there is a whole plethora of excellent, free resources, including some inspiring lesson plans, which can be accessed here: https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/centres/writing/grammar-teacher-resources/grammaraschoice/thegrammarforwritingpedagogy/

The book does not delve into detail about what grammar should be taught, other than on occasions suggesting that re-reading and improving could involve, adding 'fronted adverbials, subordinating clauses, relative clauses' (p. 56). For me, this is a contested area: too often introducing complex grammar terms that children don't understand can inhibit their ability to express themselves clearly; the focus becomes understanding the grammar, rather than concentrating upon clear communication.

Peter Elbow, possibly the most notable modern advocate of 'freewriting', is cited in the section on generating ideas, but freewriting is never promoted as a systematic strategy (p. 50). Elbow would have some issues with this as he argues that freewriting should form the bedrock from which people improve their writing; to become a fluent, expressive writers children need to enjoy the freedom of writing exactly what they want.

What is striking is how the authors are mindful of the current situation in many schools in the UK where teachers are under huge pressure to provide 'direct instruction' and basically train children to copy certain prescribed ways of writing, such as using Point Evidence And Explanation (PEE) paragraphs. This book attempts to mediate between a prescribed and freer approach to a certain extent, and does so successfully in my view because it ultimately places an emphasis upon developing pupils' autonomy and 'real-world' writing. Its advocacy of the writers' notebook (Chapter 7) is particularly pleasing to see, building upon research which is quite old now, but still very relevant:
Lambirth, A. and Goouch, K. (2006) 'Golden times of writing: the creative compliance of writing journals', Literacy (Oxford, England), 40(3), pp. 146–152. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9345.2006.00427.x.

I think this book is a step in the right direction towards empowering teachers to give children autonomy as writers. It has the virtue of setting out a clear rubric for teaching, based upon largely sound principles. However, I think it could put more emphasis upon teachers being writers, be more critical about the concept of 'writing for pleasure' and highlight the importance of freewriting for unlocking creativity to a greater degree than it does.

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