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Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners

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Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12

Regie Routman (1991)

Portsmouth, NH Heinemann

Pp. xxii + 502 + 256b

ISBN 0-435-08836-X (paper)

US \$28.50

The Blue Pages: Resources for Teachers

Regie Routmann (1994)

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Pp.viib + 256b.

ISBN 0-435-08835-1 (paper)

US \$13.50

Invitations focuses on whole language methodology for elementary school language arts, Routman has put together a primer on whole language and, more importantly, on self-de harmoniously blended and smoothly conveyed, which makes this work a pleasure to read

concerned with language teaching. Regardless of one's personal theoretical bent or specific beliefs, the book is a good one to read, think about and experiment with.

The whole language approach is presented without the hoopla of a fanatic. Routman embodies the approach in the most sense to her as an experienced teacher. She relates how, during a conversation at a conference, the meaning of "whole language" meant; "That's what we do," the teacher's principal replied (1991, p. 3). This anecdote illustrates her understanding of whole language: "If we are integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening, we are whole language teaching" (1991, p. 23).

Initially, Routman's concentration on the elementary setting, such as her extensive use of literature, might seem difficult for instructors at other levels to see the relevance. However, "The issues we struggle with in the classroom," Routman, "using literature meaningfully, giving up some control and allowing children more control," "considering holistic strategies for at-risk students, establishing a collaborative classroom, and addressing the issues for the kindergarten teacher as well as the senior high English teacher" (1991, p. 3). The book is a subject to debate, among ESL and EFL instructors.

The book is organized loosely, with no reason to read cover to cover. One should read the book in order, starting with "Becoming a Whole Language Teacher," because this is where Routman details her purpose and philosophy. The book encourages reflective reading, questioning preconceptions as the author takes the reader through her philosophy. Routman's topics range the gamut of interests for educators: "Components of Literacy," "Responding to Literature," "Teaching for Strategies," "Authentic Contexts for Writing," "Putting it into the Reading-Writing Classroom," "Setting Up an In-School Publishing Process," "Interacting with the Student," "Classroom Management and Organization," "Establishing Support Networks," and "Resources." The copious illustrations help these chapters to move quickly and smoothly, but the book is arranged in a way that allows it to be read independently into topics of personal interest.

Routman describes the development of a teacher in "Becoming a Whole Language Teacher" through her own experience. She talks about "finding [her] own literate voice," (1991, p. 21) and learning to write by immersing oneself in the theory of the field. Personal development is crucial, and she gives examples of how development may occur. The sections on resources at the end of each chapter, and the longer sections (see more below), are more than bibliographic lists. Routman provides notes on what she found useful, for example, that Frank Smith's *Essays into Literacy* (1983) is "an absolutely terrific book for helping form one's own philosophy of language and teaching" (1991, p. 29). These little tips are more digestible than teacher training works tend to be.

In "Authentic Contexts for Writing," Routman suggests that the teacher do a lot of modeling and writing. Modeling the process of composition. "[W]e cannot be teachers of writing until we demonstrate it ourselves. We become genuine users and risk takers before we can expect the same of our students" (1991, p. 10). Planning, revision, and the other steps is emphasized, as is experimentation. Routman also

“We need to notice the kinds of errors students are making and to not see them all as negative. It is important to be willing to get out on a limb to experiment with new forms. This appreciation of risk-taking is important and well.”

The chapter on evaluation is full of illustrations of how different teachers have resolved the issues. The text is narrated and photographically reproduced. The samples of handouts, including those that could mean “to look beyond standardized test scores to gather a balanced profile of a student,” are included. The book is a tuning classes put together based on standardized instruments, any ESL/EFL teacher would find it useful. It takes it a step further, forcing us to look outside of our classrooms: she says that “If we want to understand the theory of how children learn, teachers must get together and actively work for better assessment.” This need for networking among the staff is present throughout the book, and the examples are helpful to feel connected to the experiences of other instructors.

Continuing this connection with the experiences of other teachers is the chapter entitled “The Representative of Teachers’ Concerns” (1991, p. 493) and Routman’s answers. This advice is personal and direct attention to issues such as holding students back, homework, and workload. It is helpful for instructors who are not immersed in the same teaching situation as Routman’s target audience. It is also helpful for teachers who are dealing with younger students in a long-term kind of program like a public school.

The Blue Pages is a separate printing of the final reference section of *Invitations* put out in 1991. Routman’s 1991 tome would not have to buy a new edition when only the final section has been updated. The section carries extensive references and appendices which Routman considers vital for practice. In each chapter, the Blue Pages contain Routman’s comments on the strengths of different approaches and how to make use of them. There is a very nice appendix on using a unit on folk tales as part of a curriculum for different grade levels and for multicultural reading. Do not buy *The Blue Pages* alone, but buy it with *Invitations*; it is not very helpful by itself.

In “Final Reflections” there is a clear warning against expecting that adopting whole language as a profession for ourselves as teachers, will come overnight. “Allowing and valuing time for change in the profession is essential.” “Unless teachers are encouraged to take time for reading, risking, and reflecting, no meaningful change can be done. It can be frustrating to contemplate a change that takes years, this book encourages teachers to take the time to be done without losing that spark of pleasure that makes education as a profession worth the effort.”

The invitation in the title is to explore our own understanding of teaching, in addition to the issues of language arts instruction. Routman wants the book to “promote some self-reflection, risk-taking, and language learning, and a closer tie-in between theory and practice” (1991, p. 2). This is a tall order. This process. Being focused [-3-] on self-development and in-class experimentation, this text is a valuable resource for language education, be it in an ESL/EFL context or not, at elementary through adult levels.

The author, Regie Routman, is a language arts resource teacher for the Shaker Heights city school district. Her book, *Transitions: From Literature to Literacy* is also available from Heinemann.

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