Books

Tom Romano

OPENING TEXTS: USING WRITING TO TEACH LITERATURE
by Kathleen Dudden Andrasick
Heinemann, 1990

In the final chapter of Opening Texts, Kathleen Dudden Andrasick writes, "When students are not given time to experience a text, to develop a personal sense of it, and are pushed into analytical activities before they are ready, their analyses are predictably shallow. Their teachers wail, 'These kids can't think!' They are right. But, given the setting, nobody could — they do not have a firmly established foundation on which to build" (p. 185).

Andrasick, a secondary school English teacher, co-director of the Hawaii Writing Project, and department head at Iolani School in Honolulu, describes how she teaches students to build foundations for themselves that support their critical inquiries into literary texts. Andrasick believes that the sequencing of individual and collaborative learning experiences in writing, reading, and responding enables students to move into the analytical activities necessary to write formally about literary texts. When I say literary, I mean the likes of Hawthorne, Faulkner, Melville, Dickinson, Thoreau, and Joyce.

While it is clear Andrasick values canonical literature, her book is not about the golden merits of such reading. It is, instead, about teaching students the processes and giving them the experiences they need to move critically into literary texts. Her major teaching strategy — the very heart of her book — is the use of writing to teach reading. Her sequencing experiences begin by involving students in writing dialogue journals, process logs, and reading responses. These recursive explorations enable students to perceive more deeply and connect more thoroughly with literature. Andrasick also has students write imaginatively in conjunction with their reading. She believes "that the writing normally relegated to the creative writing class, when coupled with literary study, works to improve students' expository writing" (p. 133).

Andrasick seeks to unite critical and creative endeavors. Her students imitate various sentence constructions and literary forms in order to "develop thinking patterns useful for critical inquiry and conscious control of their own powers of linguistic manipulation" (pp. 106-107). They use meaningful lines from texts and prevailing ideas of literary periods to launch their own poems, essays, and narratives. Imitating literary texts and using quotations from them as springboards to generate their own imaginative writing "release[s] a wealth of critical thought" (p. 133) in students.

Responding and reflecting, imagining and transforming are not ends in themselves in Andrasick's classroom. They are part of the sequence of expressive and poetic writing experiences that move students ever closer to critical literary inquiry. Through these sequential assignments students experience literature, gain necessary critical distance from it, and, eventually, write formal, analytic essays. Ultimately, Andrasick evaluates her students' "performance as literary critics" (p. 145).

Which means that they must write more than thesis driven, five paragraph essays, or single assertion, linear arguments. And they do. Through process and sequence, Andrasick teaches them to write complex, meaningful, readable discourse. Such a process route can complicate a teacher's job. "Things become less tidy," writes Andrasick. "We juggle many balls at a time: whole class, small group, and individual work; work with reading critically, and with talking collaboratively; work with concepts and with mechanics. Student response to the literature becomes more complex (which is, after all, what we want), and we need to find ways to prepare students to deal with complexity. ... They need practice to learn how to
subordinate and relate ideas to produce balanced, coherent prose” (p. 176).

Andrasick’s method won’t fit the pedagogy of teachers whose classrooms are student-centered reading and writing workshops. Neither, in all probability, will her method match the pedagogy of teachers who demand that students run sub four minute miles through a thousand years or several centuries of a country’s literary canon.

So be it. Andrasick is concerned with analysis, not just response. And she believes in depth, not superficial coverage. For teaching students to write critical, literary inquiry, Andrasick’s fusion of writing process strategies and reader response theory seems right on the mark. Many teachers of traditional literature have waited a long time for a book like Opening Texts, one in which an author writes balanced, coherent prose in bringing together a great deal of inside and outside knowledge of writing, reading, teaching, and learning. Andrasick reveals a classroom in which literary intellectual rigor is always the goal, and the process is ever the means.

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STUDENT WORLDS, STUDENT WORDS: TEACHING WRITING THROUGH FOLKLORE
by Elizabeth Radin Simons
Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1990

Sam Keen tells us that “we don’t know who we are until we hear ourselves speaking the drama of our lives to someone we trust to listen with open heart and mind” (p. xviii). In her quite remarkable book, Elizabeth Radin Simons actually models ways to enter “student worlds” and to listen to “student words” with “open heart and mind.” It is Elizabeth Simons’ own students who tell best what her method accomplishes. One student writes: “Folklore is a good way to start learning to write because most of it is just telling [a story]” (p. 218). Another writes: “… getting into groups really helped us, not only in our oral reading but getting together and working as a team, correcting each others papers” (p. 218). And Miguel writes: “This class has taught me and my peers to learn from ourselves” (p. 218). But it is Lupe who expresses in her learning log the most profound insight: how folklore helps us “… to know each other better in our inside and our outside” (p. 1).

The affirmative statements of these young people, along with the enthusiastic response of teachers already using Elizabeth Simons’ folklore units, lead me to conclude that her book Student Worlds, Student Words bears a particular urgency for study by teachers who are trying to motivate and teach youth in today’s cities and suburbs. A treasury of sound, practical teaching strategies, this excellent book shows the many ways students are deeply affected by the study of folklore. For one thing, they like it. And we all know that we usually learn best when we are enjoying ourselves most. Students like folklore because it is very much a part of their lives. It is available to everyone, even to those who do not otherwise excel in school. Because everyone has access to a repository of lore — songs, games, jokes, riddles, superstitions, insults, greetings, stories, legends — the distinction between the informed and the ignorant does not hold the significance in folklore that it does in many school subjects. Thus, folklore from the students’ own lives, gathered and shared in their own words in spoken and written performances, enlarges their expressive capabilities and nurtures their self-confidence.

Because many teachers consider the study of folklore trivial, transient, hardly worth the time in the face of all the curricular requirements keyed to studying the literature of high culture and to practicing “serious” writing, it is often neglected or relegated to short units in English curricula. Some may argue that much of the writing that