Books

Harold Nelson

TEACHER AS WRITER: ENTERING THE PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATION
Edited by Karin L. Dahl
National Council of Teachers of English, 1992

Teacher as Writer says teachers should be encouraged to write so they can grow professionally and so they can help other teachers. Karin L. Dahl, the book’s editor, writes in the Introduction, “As teachers place themselves in the role of writers, they become consumers of professional literature and creators of new information about teaching. To participate in the professional conversation is to shape its topics and focus—to change and be changed by its information and differing points of view” (p. 2). I agree, and I wish I could write a rave review of this book.

I can’t write such a review. The anthology is too uneven. Thirty-one teachers wrote or co-wrote the book’s twenty-nine chapters. With so many authors, Ms. Dahl needed to maintain quality control more carefully. For me, reading the book was like spending a couple of days at a professional convention. I felt like applauding after some of the presentations, and I wished I would have sat closer to the door so I could have snuck out after ten minutes while I read other presentations.

How can one book help teachers participate in the “professional conversation”? What sorts of advice and encouragement should it contain? This sprawling book contains six sections, six sets of answers to these questions: “From the Author’s Perspective,” “Thinking Like a Writer,” “From the Editor’s Perspective,” “Essential Information for Teacher Writers,” “The Craft of Writing for Publication,” and “Teacher Writer Communities.” Ms. Dahl has a hard time pulling these sections together when she explains the book’s purpose.

This book is directed to the expanded professional conversation. Rather than being a handbook for teachers about writing for publication, the book directs its attention more broadly. Our purpose is to suggest possibilities for teachers interested in writing for professional journals, to coax educators away from old habits, and to encourage teacher voices in the new conversation (p. 2).

The title also shows a book still wandering, still looking for a clear purpose. Teacher as Writer: Entering the Professional Conversation implies the book is for all teachers, but music or art or physics teachers will find less relevant material in the book than language arts teachers. The suggestions in Chapter Sixteen, “Nuts and Bolts of Writing a Manuscript,” are broadly applicable, true for most professional writing. A history teacher would find this chapter worthwhile, but would skip over Chapter Seventeen, “Searching for Journals: A Brief Guide and 100 Sample Species,” since the chapter lists only language arts journals. Language Arts Teachers as Writers: Entering the Professional Conversation would have been a more accurate title.

Thomas Newkirk makes enthusiastic claims about the book in his Foreword. I’ve read Mr. Newkirk’s work, I know him by reputation, and I respect him. I don’t understand why he begins by asking “Where was this book when I really needed it?” This opening line for me has the ring of the book advertisements I receive every year that begin “Finally, or “At last, the book we’ve been waiting for.”
Mr. Newkirk states in the third paragraph that "the process of writing has never been as well explained as it is in this volume." For me, the explanations of process were competent, good, but not equal to those given by people like Janet Emig, Linda Flower, and Don Murray. My grandfather used to say, "When you kick a half-empty barrel, it rings louder than a full one." Mr. Newkirk is kicking a half-empty barrel.

Some chapters should be revised or deleted. Thelma Kilker’s "Confessions of a Computer Convert" encourages teachers who want to publish to write on a word processor. Is this chapter necessary in a book published in 1992? Forty-seven teachers participated in Institutes sponsored by the Northern Plains Writing Project this summer. These teachers represented all levels, kindergarten through university, and they worked in Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, and Saskatchewan. They came from a fairly wide geographic area. All wrote well during the Institutes. All could publish if they'd like to do so. Only two or three of these forty-seven participants did not write on computers this summer. These teachers, who represent a cross-section of Teacher as Writer's audience, clearly don't need the chapter.

Chris Crowe’s "Why Write for Publication?" isn't irrelevant, it's preachy. This is a chapter intended to give "some answers designed to encourage teachers to write and submit articles for publication" (p. 75). Most teachers thinking about writing for publication probably won't be swayed by "shoulds." The first answer begins, "To teach writing effectively, teachers should understand all that writing is. And the best way to really understand writing is to write" (p. 75). I know, I know, I know. I know I should write more so I understand writing better rather than watching old movies on television, and I know I should diet because I still weigh the same as when I played left tackle—and I've not knocked down a quarterback in years. Turn on the tube! Pass the potato chips! But some of the chapters realistically encourage teachers who are interested in publishing and offer practical suggestions on how to do so. In "Inside Language Arts: An Editor's Story of One Journal," William H. Teale discusses how he and his staff decide which manuscripts to publish. These decisions are tough, since only one out of every ten manuscripts submitted makes it to print. After presenting facts and suggestions, Mr. Teale gives honest encouragement: "Be tough. Writing is not easy. It takes a great deal of time to write an article for a journal. But even more, it takes a great deal of energy and discipline" (p. 115).

Nancy Gorrell writes unpretentiously, with clarity and grace, about how writing and publishing helped her grow. She records how she worked on an article for *English Journal*: "It was an odd, comforting feeling, working until 3 a.m. with the sounds of my family asleep around me. I relished the solitude, the privacy, the uninterrupted moments of thought. I was where I wanted to be, in front of that typewriter, writing, and I felt at once a sense of productivity and inner peace" (p. 21). Most teachers who write will relate to the experiences Ms. Gorrell records in "A Teacher's Story of Renewal."

In "Evolving Voice," Tom Romano discusses a more limited aspect of growing as a writer—he writes about how he developed his author's voice. His writing is open, specific, rich with insight. The chapter gives good advice, and it illustrates good writing. This passage deals with what Mr. Romano learned from his daughter:

*I was daily in the company of a natural metaphor maker, an unpretentious poet who saw the world new each day with responsive eyes. For her the world was a marvelous curiosity shop. When I served hamburgers for supper, I learned that the catsup-soaked top of the bun was a delicious "sweet lid." I learned that smoke rings were doughnuts, that umbrellas were more properly termed "rainbrellas," and that the*
BOOKS

fountain in the middle of the shopping mall was not a fountain at all, but rather 'jumping water' (p. 14).

Chris M. Anson and Bruce Maylath remind writers that "In most cases, the two or three most widely cited journals represent only a fraction of the publishing opportunities in a given field." They illustrate this point by listing and giving information about many language arts journals, and they preface the list with a caution: "What our long list gains in breadth it loses in depth. For purposes of your own writing and publishing, a smaller but more descriptive list can be a valuable asset. The best way to keep such a list is in your own personal 'publishing journal'" (pp. 157, 158). The list of journals in "Searching for Journals: A Brief Guide and 100 Sample Species" suggests possible journals many writers might not have considered, including regional journals. It serves as a good starting point for selecting journals.

I'll see many of the teachers who attended NPWP Institutes this summer or in previous summers at a reunion we're planning this fall. For those teachers interested in publishing, I'll recommend materials I've personally found valuable, including William Zinsser's On Writing Well and books and magazines published by Writer's Digest and The Writer. I'll mention other works on publishing if these colleagues are interested. When I mention Teacher as Writer, I'll suggest that they skim before reading.

Harold Nelson has been director of the Northern Plains Writing Project since 1978. He is a professor of English at Minot State University, Minot, ND, where he teaches classes in literature for children, writing, and teaching writing.

John R. Maitino

FORMS OF WONDERING: A DIALOGUE ON WRITING, FOR WRITERS
by William A. Covino
Heinemann Boynton/Cook, 1990

An Alternative Textbook
Would you wish to teach college writing with a composition textbook which contained neither a table of contents, an index, nor easily discernible divisions, sections, and topics? You might — or you might not — if the textbook was William Covino's Forms of Wondering.

You might be drawn to such a textbook because its readings and unconventional organization stimulate the kind of thinking and classroom dialogue which can lead to reflective and authentic student writing. The readings cover a range of topics including makeup, pornography, defense spending, the uses of writing, MTV, AIDS, and the metaphor. (I'll talk later about ways I might introduce and use a specific reading in the classroom.) Covino organizes the book as a "continuous dialogue" on the readings, on models of writing, with interspersed assignments and actual student essays written in his classes.

On the other hand, you might be put off by this so-called "textbook" because it refuses to let you use it the way you use a textbook: you can't easily look up information, modes of writing, assignments, or "how to" suggestions for writing. You might also be troubled by the absence of any ethnic and multicultural readings which explore ethnic experience, the place of the immigrant in American culture, and so on.

The first criticism seemed less and less relevant as I read further in Forms of Wondering. I discovered