Vision & Voice:
Extending the Literacy Spectrum

by Linda Rief
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. $19.00; 160 pages

reviewed by Nancy D. Kersell

At the heart of any language arts curriculum, teachers focus on classroom practices, integrating material and writing strategies from a variety of disciplines. With engaging enthusiasm, Linda Rief invites us to join her in “extending our notions of the literacy spectrum to include the visual and oral arts in the reading and writing classroom” (ix). This short text provides a number of writing-to-learn exercises which encourage students to express themselves using artistic forms ranging from song lyrics to cartoons. Although her activities are designed for middle school students, the ideas, techniques, and outcomes she proposes can be adapted easily for any grade level.

Rief describes two comprehensive projects that illustrate how to integrate interdisciplinary material in the writing classroom: a lengthy environmental study of the rain forest and a unit on textile mills of the Industrial Revolution. The rain forest project involved students in research and creative activities culminating in all sorts of products, including bookmarks, pamphlets, picture books, posters, curriculum guides for younger students, and a full-scale, three-dimensional rain forest model. She provides numerous samples of student work depicting their research methods as well as their final creative pieces.

Using different but equally versatile strategies, Rief focuses on music, a field trip, and historical fiction to immerse her students in the atmosphere of nineteenth-century textile mills. After they had explored the economic and cultural significance of the textile industry, her students composed poems and converted them into song lyrics, created a story theater, and combined all these elements into a musical production about work in the mills.

Since many teachers lack the resources or time to assign such impressive but complex projects, Rief also includes a chapter of “practical vignettes,” called “Picturing Possibilities,” containing short exercises for inspiring creativity based on student journal entries. Many of the samples include cartoons on current events and historical topics, sketches or doodles, and poetry painted on the school building walls.

Without plunging into theory, Rief’s list of outcomes clearly demonstrates how practicing other art forms can help students discover multiple ways of knowing in the “language-rich” classroom. In particular, she stresses the value of exposing students to interdisciplinary study, reinforcing different learning styles, encouraging a spirit of inquiry, and developing research skills—certainly not original concepts, but crucial to the enrichment of our students’ lives.

This guidebook contains a tantalizing and extensive series of appendices with samples of teacher handouts and student work. Rief also provides extensive lists of references following each chapter. A multimedia CD supplementing the book features more detailed photographs and commentary about the two primary projects at each stage of their development.

Although Vision & Voice doesn’t offer many innovative techniques, it does supply educators wanting to awaken their students’ artistic sensibilities with an impressive catalog of resources, teaching ideas, and concrete advice for giving students a wider spectrum of learning opportunities. As in her earlier books, Linda Rief also imparts a love of teaching which is contagious and inspirational. All these attributes contained in Vision & Voice make it a useful guidebook for reawakening our imaginations to the power of artistic expression in all its forms and sharing this appreciation with our students.

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