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voicing challenges us to rethink the nature of imitation and move beyond restrictive exercises to define imitation in a way devoid of dialogue. By fundamentally redefining the nature of imitation, Farmer believes, we increase its value to writing instruction. Interestingly, he refrains from becoming prescriptive, leaving it to readers to imagine for themselves the forms that "dialogic imitation" might take in any particular context—as if challenging each of us to conceive of such an approach in our own ways.

Yet while he does not provide specific examples, the call to action is clear, and a theoretical framework is carefully articulated here. This chapter is indicative, I think, of the author's willingness to go out on a limb, to stand the chance of moving "disciplinary conversations" among writing teachers and composition theorists forward in productive and provocative ways.

Reading Frank Farmer's Saying and Silence, I am reminded of listening to student-led discussion over the years, and particularly to one class grappling with The Autobiography of Malcolm X at El Cerrito High School in California. Students in Joan Cone's classroom were coming to terms with the way Malcolm X, throughout the course of his life, had revised his views, sometimes in dramatic ways. Where some might see vacillation or even contradiction, they found virtue—a flexibility that a number attempted consciously to emulate when they spoke and wrote themselves. The students likened such transformations to their own as adolescents in a pluralistic society sorting out their own beliefs and, indeed, a sense of self. Earlier that year, Cone had introduced Montaigne and the origins of the modern essay. At the heart of this essay tradition is a willingness to reexamine—and revise—one's way of thinking, to enter into dialogue with the ideas of others: in essence, to reinvent oneself. This willingness to rethink things seemed to many of these students a benchmark of credibility. Such negotiation of perspectives and beliefs is precisely the sort of dialogue that the essays in Farmer's book contemplate and at moments even seem to model.

"In our class discussion, in our assignments, in our responses to student work, as well as in every other aspect of our pedagogies," he suggests, "we pitch camp on borderlines, for there and only there are we able to meet our twin obligations to mutual inquiry, to dialogue, and to the critique of how popular forms underwrite existing power relations." This book is important because it reconceptualizes such dialogic classroom practices, sensitive to the diverse voices of students and, in light of Bakhtin, a theory that might guide us toward such ideals.

Lighting Fires: How the Passionate Teacher Engages Adolescent Writers


How do we motivate students to write? Joseph Tsujimoto's Lighting Fires: How the Passionate Teacher Engages Adolescent Writers offers a view of how one teacher channels students' imaginations and creativity through meaningful writing exercises, providing students with countless opportunities to improve their craft.

Much of the book is organized into chapters on different genres of writing. For each genre, the author includes examples of his own work, his students' work, and writings by published authors. He provides examples of the handouts he supplies students for writing in these genres. For several genres, he outlines his daily routine.

Throughout the book, the author illustrates how purposeful instructional techniques and strategies can cultivate an environment that allows students to write without fear of embarrassment, one that encourages reflection and sharing among all students in the class.

He creates a classroom community that encourages team effort at revision.

[It doesn't matter that not] a single suggestion offered to you is superior to what you already have. All you ask is that the suggestion be different from what you already have so that you have a basis for comparison. What you want is lots of suggestions for lots of different people. (56)

The first chapter details the author's background and experiences as a teacher of writing, his involvement with the National Writing Project (NWP), and the forces that helped shape him into the passionate teacher he has become. He recounts how National Writing Project founder Jim Gray asked him to deliver the keynote address at the 1989 NWP Annual Meeting. The speech was well received, but in planning his talk, Tsujimoto had doubts, wondering if "some of the things I have to say would seem contrary to the current ideas favoring a student centered-classroom."

As the title of his book suggests Tsujimoto does spotlight the central role of the "passionate teacher.”
The great teacher—or as is more often the case, instances of great teaching by good teachers—transcends personality and philosophy. . . . At such instances, the teacher is so immersed in his reading, or in his speaking, or in his characterization, that he sheds all consciousness of self. And the students see embodied before them the very spirit of learning: the very subject to be learned. So that it can be said that what is ultimately learned is the teacher. (4)

In addition to the genre chapters (which we will consider below), Tsujimoto devotes a chapter to laying out thirty-two assumptions about writing, reading, and speaking that he dictates to his students throughout the year. He asks his students to write about these statements and shares students’ responses to most of the prompts. He prefaces his dictation of these assumptions with the notion that they are “. . . theses, claims to be proved or disproved during students’ stay in my classroom” (50). When, however, the reader examines learning log responses, it becomes clear that Tsujimoto’s assumptions, which have been compiled over the course of his teaching career, have been tested and confirmed by many of his students. Here are some of his assumptions. “There are three things that intrigue intelligent readers: new information or insight, other people, and complexity or richness” (55). “Reading is an interpretive act. We half-create what we read.” “Everything in a work of literature is significant or can be made significant through skillful interpretation” (62).

Eighth-grader Robyn Nakamoto responded as follows to this latter statement:

A piece of writing is like a page of hieroglyphics, which needs to be read and reread to uncover its true meanings. Behind these simple carvings lies a story. Depending on what knowledge you have of archeology and reading hieroglyphics, these inscriptions may translate into different things for each person. (62)

In a chapter titled “Reflection,” the author describes his use of learning logs where students periodically respond to prompts that force them to reflect on and describe their personal feelings related to a range of topics that include their ability to read others’ work, their ability to reflect, their impressions of the course, and their development as writers. In rationalizing his use of learning logs, Tsujimoto writes:

In addition to having our students make what they have learned clear to themselves and to us, they also can lead us to improve our teaching, for as often as not, students learn lesser, greater, more and different things than we intend. (37)

The first of Tsujimoto’s genre chapters focuses on poetry. He shares his students’ initial negative responses that are familiar to most English teachers. However, Tsujimoto’s style leads students slowly through the writing task and beyond their initial fears. He believes poetry is just the right place to start.

Newness is everything—especially for kids entering or in the midst of puberty . . . especially when their experience of English over the years has been pretty much the same from class to class. What else besides poetry is as emotional and songlike as they are? (13)

Discussing his first poetry assignment, he describes how he requires students to construct two-word poems (Grandmother/rain), that ultimately become well-written works that go beyond what many would expect of middle school students. Tsujimoto accomplishes this transformation by finding ways to move students past their anxiety about writing poetry and ways for them to write about things they know about and can relate well to their readers.

Another of the genre chapters focuses on ways to help students write narrative pieces successfully. The author emphasizes the connection between reading and writing and makes use of this connection as he works to transform students into writers. He shares many examples from authors such as Saki and John Updike, as well as from students’ work. These serve to illustrate how different authors make use of literary tools such as point of view, dialogue, and characterization. He does not shy away from some of the most sophisticated aspects of storytelling.

I also teach the story in order to show students that we must be wary of the observations and assertions told to us by a first-person narrator. Sometimes the narrator unintentionally gives us the wrong information, motivation, reason, or conclusion. And usually through artful or less obvious means, the author tells us what is really true or more accurate, or presents us with a quandary or dilemma, leaving it up to us to decide the truth. (101)

As a result of these discussions and of looking at stories like Updike’s “A & P,” the unreliable narrator becomes a feature of some student stories.

Another chapter describes a school-wide speech contest. The writing of these speeches spans a two-week period and involves
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students drafting, sharing, and critiquing others' speeches based upon the criteria set forth in the guidelines for the contest. Tsujimoto details some of the techniques he uses, ways to encourage students to brainstorm topics and overcome the fears of public speaking.

Tsujimoto also devotes a chapter to a critical analysis paper he calls “the function paper.” He leads us through how he teaches students to read and write critically about a particular aspect of a novel. Here, as in the rest of his book, Tsujimoto is not averse to challenging the conventional wisdom.

Contrary to general belief, I think that teaching kids to write thesis papers is easier than teaching them how to write stories and personal narratives.... [W]riting a good story is very, very difficult. Although the writer must follow certain dictates of time, which the story must necessarily span, the good writer also operates according to other kinds of “logic,” for which, many times, we have no name and which we cannot easily explain.

On the other hand, thesis writing, like the function paper, is grounded on logical reasoning, and there are certain limitations, governed by the conventions of writing such a paper and by the literature their writing addresses, which the writer must follow. This is unlike the unlimited freedom granted the story writer, which can cripple a writer. Thesis writing is easier to teach—and these are easier to write—because the patterns are more easily identifiable and are, for the most part, universal, predictable, and repeatable. (168)

Tsujimoto's ideas about exam writing are also a bit off center. He makes a case for expanding “our definition of ‘exam writing’...to include other kinds of writing” (171). He offers a solid rationale for this expansion and enumerates several problems with traditional examination approaches, including students' regurgitation of discussion content, boring writing, and a lack of personal connection to the writing task.

Tsujimoto's last chapter discusses the persona of the teacher and how good teachers adjust their personality to fit their classroom agenda. He details how a teacher's persona can aid in students' learning and shares stories about a number of teachers who were not only memorable, but whose passion facilitated students' learning. According to the author, “Passion is who you are, what you teach, and the way you teach it...”(189).

There are few but important limitations to be considered while reading Tsujimoto's book. First is the environment in which Tsujimoto teaches. He works in a private school where students undergo a rigorous admission process, a teaching situation most of his readers will not share. Further, it is obvious that there are considerable resources available to teachers and students both in and out of school. For example, all students in Tsujimoto's class have individual copies of each novel in which they highlight and make notes. Many readers may face much tougher situations that impact their teaching, including a lack of materials and financial resources.

Moreover, many teachers are faced with increasing pressure to meet standards and to train students in recipe-like writing in order to be successful on state-mandated exams. Failure to mention these difficulties, despite the fact that many of his strategies could be easily implemented in such stifling situations, seems to demonstrate a lack of awareness of the circumstances that impact many of today's teachers.

There are other issues to consider as well. Tsujimoto shares his classroom routines and approach mostly through what appear to be transcripts of classroom interaction. While this is effective in demonstrating how he engages his students in the writing task, it might be misinterpreted that he expects readers to use these as a script to be carefully followed. Additionally, Tsujimoto's failure to cite much of the research supporting his classroom activity, including reader response theory and questioning techniques, as well as what is known about effectively leading discussions and creating ideal conditions for learning, might erroneously suggest that these strategies and techniques are the result only of Tsujimoto's classroom experiences and reflection, rather than his reading and study about effective teaching. Finally, Tsujimoto's subtitle might also mistakenly imply that his is the only way for a teacher to be characterized as passionate.

Beyond these shortcomings, however, Joseph Tsujimoto's work offers practitioners a number of ideas about how to motivate and excite middle and high school writers. His approach calls for and demonstrates a strong commitment to ensuring authentic writing experiences that grow out of the need for teachers to take on the responsibility of getting to know their students as writers and individuals.

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