Although the stories appeal strongly to middle school students, *Teaching Powerful Writing* is a book useful for teachers across a broad spectrum, not only of grade levels, but of experience levels and teaching styles as well. Pedagogically, it's useful because it's full of sound, practical best-practice advice and materials, but it's also useful for teachers on another level. In the acknowledgments, Bob Sizoo talks about his early experiences with writing (“I hated writing in school”), and first coming to the National Writing Project summer institute (“As the directors explained to their somewhat reluctant audience, you wouldn't take your child to a piano teacher who couldn't play the piano. After overcoming my initial revulsion at writing with peers, I discovered something...”). And he's not the only one.

Terry McLaughlin, in her Notes from the Author for her piece “Navigating the Straight and Narrow,” confesses, “When I was required to attend a college writing class two years ago, I was horrified to receive an assignment to tell a story about myself. For weeks, I poked through dull memories, searching for some incident I could embellish. As the due date approached, painful insecurities surfaced: My life was boring, nothing in it had deep meaning, and my writing was inadequate to make sense of whatever I managed to think up” (27).

These are comments about the growing pains of becoming a writer. They are certainly not uncommon; they are not even the only ones in this book. I could add my own, and it would fit right in and would feature the same protagonists of terror: the personal narrative, getting response from peers, reading it aloud. When Sizoo and McLaughlin use words like revulsion and horrified, they're not kidding. But as Sizoo goes on to say in the acknowledgments, “After writing to prompts, meeting in a writing response group with other teachers, sharing my work and listening to other teachers share theirs with the whole group, and learning to pay close attention to voice, audience, and purpose, my writing improved. As importantly to my teaching, I began to get hung up at some of the same places in my writing that snagged my students. I returned to my teaching that fall with not only a renewed vigor for teaching writing but with more empathy for some of the problems my students were having and more experience at coping with those problems.” This book is valuable not only because it presents students with a picture of teachers as writers, but perhaps even more so because it presents that picture, that model, to us, the teachers.

If one hallmark of a good English teacher is the ability to help students connect literature to their lives, and if we are, indeed, living in a global village where there is paramount need to bridge ethnic, religious, cultural, and lifestyle gaps, then the methodology John Gaughan espouses in *Reinventing English: Teaching in the Contact Zone* may be the vanguard for reformed English curricula. But any district that endorses a similar program should brace itself for the controversy that is sure to ensue.

Gaughan borrows the term contact zone from Mary Louis Pratt, who uses it to describe the space where “student and teacher's ideologies conflict” (33), and he molds his contemporary English classes around this clash of values and beliefs. Using a wealth of pertinent books, poems, films, and creative lesson plans, Gaughan addresses the gamut of prejudices—from race and religion to sexuality and censorship—that most adolescents bring into the classroom. If sensationalism is present in his pedagogy, Gaughan makes no attempt to hide it. In the opening pages of his text, he boldfaces the headlines of past hate crimes and recounts the number of students killed and wounded in highly publicized school shootings, including those at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

Justifying his call to teach in the contact zone, Gaughan writes: “Whether we like it or not, schools must address societal problems. Teachers may not have gone to college to become counselors or psychologists, but sometimes we must play these roles...” [T]he traditional organization of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society...Our troubled society is forcing [educators] to reconsider what we do in schools” (8). This conviction compels him to get his students to examine “some of the assumptions that underlie our lives” (12).

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Beginning his semester by asking his students to think about the relationship between place and identity, Gaughan asks students to read Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago by Lealan Jones and Lloyd Newman. He then assigns a multigenre paper about life in the local communities of either Lockland or Arlington, Ohio. Gaughan offers numerous options for this assignment but requires a character sketch, an interview with a neighbor or relative, photographs or sketches of people in the neighborhood, and a dialog with a friend about an incident from the neighborhood. He also requires written reflective pieces at the end of this assignment and writes: “Multiple genres act as multiple lenses... Seeing helps [students] answer the question ‘Who are you?’” (21).

In one classic example of “Non-tenured teachers, don’t try this at home,” Gaughan asks students to examine and write about family relationships, all forms of abuse included. “My guess is that most students don’t share these pieces with their families,” Gaughan writes. “Still, no one has complained” (21). Then, Gaughan goes on to take greater risks. He provides a case scenario to examine ethics and identity before addressing immigration and race, sexism, sex and sexuality, racial prejudice, war and voice, and censorship and faith among other related topics, many of which are admittedly potentially inflammatory. A classroom discussion regarding immigration and race “blazed like a fire out of control,” according to Gaughan, but the discussion “was a risk I’d take again” in part because “the self we construct must reflect our interactions with people different from ourselves” (30).

The risks and possible fallout notwithstanding, Gaughan offers a number of creative activities to help students understand literature, history, prejudices, and themselves. One such strategy is a game called Four Corners, in which students literally show where they stand regarding controversial social issues and then discover whether open debate compels them to change their opinions. He uses centers with activities that address multiple intelligences and learning styles as well as attitudes and prejudices, and he assigns poems in two voices (based on Paul Fleischman’s I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices) to help students see the connection between the Nazi holocaust and discrimination in their own lives. He also shows the film The Power of One to demonstrate how a single person can help change the attitudes of many, a film one of his grateful students, himself the victim of discrimination, referred to in a letter to Gaughan.

Gaughan acknowledges successes, failures, and his own insecurities. He writes about one student who gradually learned how verbal abuse can escalate into violence and even homicide, and how one girl realized, after immersing herself in Gaughan’s literature selections, that she had much in common with the lesbians she read about. Gaughan also candidly admits “the years it took for my own attitude toward African Americans to change” (38) and wonders “if I’d done the right thing” (127) after challenging a student’s faith in the Bible regarding its professed stance on homosexuality.

In his final chapter, Gaughan emphasizes the need to stress context when teaching in the contact zone. “Teaching in the contact zone is risky business,” he writes. “It may offend the sensibilities of students and parents, administrators and colleagues. But, would we be sparing our students similar confrontations later?” (134). He concludes by stating: “I believe that education can save society. . . . Long-term, sustained thinking requires immersion. Consider the thematic contexts presented here. . . . Don’t just experiment with strategies. Create a context” (137).

Gaughan may have a point, but like many innovative thinkers, he may be too far ahead of his time. Not only would complying school districts need to readress missions and restructure budgets, but they would also have to embark on massive public relations campaigns to convince parents that the strategy is worthwhile. If, as Gaughan states, education can save society, symbiotically, society must also, as part of the process, be motivated to save education.

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