I wonder how many college teachers were actually taught how to teach? When I was first offered a position teaching college writing, I ran to the university bookstore and settled in amongst the composition texts to figure out for myself how to teach the course. Every text there offered the same recipe: Teach the modes of discourse one at a time, discuss model essays, and assign an essay based on each mode. I soon abandoned teaching composition this way; it just felt wrong to me, but I had no idea why or how I should teach instead.

I wish Jeanne Henry had been my colleague as I struggled alone with my classroom pedagogy. Reading her book *If Not Now: Developmental Readers in the College Classroom* is like sitting in a warm kitchen on a cold morning, sipping coffee and talking shop-talk with a good friend, someone who is as good at teaching — or even better — than you are, who not only knows viscerally what is right for her students and goes for it, but can even point to the theory that supports those good instincts.

College pedagogy has been much on my mind lately. I’m currently enrolled in a graduate course, the focus of which is the application of learning theory to classroom instruction. Oblivious to the irony in his own practice, the professor stands behind a podium and lectures to us about how students learn better when provided with opportunities to construct their own knowledge. We take copious notes. He doesn’t realize that learning theory applies to adults as well as to children. I’m thinking of slipping him Jeanne Henry’s book. After one semester of following the teacher’s manual in her developmental reading classes at Northern Kentucky University, she “took all the college reading textbooks off the bookshelves” in her office and “dropped them one at a time into the trash can with a ‘bomb’s away’ whistle.” The next semester, Henry began using class time for reading rather than talking about reading.”

Henry follows Nancie Atwell’s reading workshop and refers to her for the nuts and bolts of the workshop approach, but even if you are familiar with Atwell’s *In the Middle*, read *If Not Now*. Many teachers reject Atwell, arguing that her approach won’t work in their classrooms. Henry, however, is flexible enough to apply Atwell’s strategies to her own students who arrive under-prepared for college, burdened with poor attitudes about reading and education. They are “physically handicapped, learning disabled, poor... recovering from drug or alcohol addictions, or clinically depressed.” Most are working or raising children. One of her students referred to the class as “the trauma ward.”
In fact, Henry approaches reading workshop very much like a physical therapist approaches a client, retraining her students’ minds just as a physical therapist renews the body. She walks them through the steps required to get a library card and to find what they want at a book store. She reads to them on the floor, and includes minilessons on knowing when to abandon a book, how to predict what is going to happen next, and how to move beyond their comfort zone in reading.

Even if you are not familiar with In the Middle, read If Not Now. Henry includes her course syllabus which provides enough information about reading workshop to get started, a list of minilessons, and suggestions for a class library. She takes you through the process step by step in a humorous, natural style, describing how she chooses the popular fiction her students love (“I tend to go for anything with a bloody, clawed hand on the cover”) or how she interacts with particularly outspoken students (“Talk to them, try to be understanding, and, if that fails, hide the body”). She also writes honestly about the work involved in teaching reading workshop: In one class alone, she responded to two hundred and twelve literary letters written by students and read fifteen to twenty books they recommended. Although she admits this approach is “labor intensive and time consuming,” by the time you have finished If Not Now, you will understand why there is no other way to teach developmental reading.

The basis for reading workshop is, of course, reading, but it is also writing. Henry has adopted Atwell’s “literary letters” to “sustain, maintain, and extend” her students’ reading, letters which her students come to see as “a very particular kind of correspondence about books.” Having tried “just about every writing-about-reading activity known to the profession,” Henry notes that “the reciprocal nature of the reading and writing processes” found in the literary letters help her students establish a clear sense of audience and encourage authentic, engaged writing.

**Writing about what they read allows developmental readers “to explore the meanings they find important,” mingling “interpretation with self-evaluation.”**

Through her analysis of the 420 letters her students wrote to her in one semester, Henry confirms that writing about what they read allows developmental readers “to explore the meanings they find important,” mingling “interpretation with self-evaluation.” Here is one sample she includes from one of those literary letters, written after reading The Color Purple by Alice Walker:

*You better thank God when the people around you show their love freely. You think about what it means to live with contempt like Celie did. Lots of people do. I’m going to remember this when my mother gets smothering. She just loves me.*

Jeanne Henry views teachers as experts, defends her pedagogical choices, values teacher-research, and searches across the grade levels for what’s best for her students. She also applies theory to classroom instruction, digesting Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory and demonstrating how to apply it to Atwell’s practice. She adds to this theoretical mix Carole Edelsky’s definitions of authentic and inauthentic reading, a combination which helps Henry understand that her students have not rejected all reading, just school reading. She has theoretical foundation to drive her practice, but she doesn’t let theory get in the way of learning from her students. They remind her, among other important lessons, that “even an escapist novel can take you inside yourself and inspire enough insight to make you evaluate your life.”

I do have some concerns about Henry’s approach. She seems to dismiss learning disabilities such as ADD and dyslexia, saying that students “may have been labeled” as such, implying that they may not be learning disabled at all, but instead what she terms “en-trenched nonreaders.” Although the students Henry describes do learn “the purposes and pleasures” of reading, she doesn’t deal with those students, such as my own daughter, who can’t rather than won’t read a book. I’ve tempted her with 90210 and Melrose Place paperbacks, Nightmare on Elm Street gore and the X-files, but her learning disabilities
make reading anxiety-producing and just plain hard work. On NKU’s open-admissions campus, Henry might find my daughter in her section of LAP091. Part of me wants to ship her off to Henry special delivery, but a bigger part of me is skeptical. The reading workshop approach can’t work all the time. Although Henry provides us with caveats, she never examines how these truly LD students fare in her workshop.

On a minor note, I would also have liked an index. Although Henry’s book is meant as a reader-friendly description of her doctoral research, someone using If Not Now as a guide for reading workshop may have trouble pinpointing particular sections for advice. Perhaps the best approach is to have both If Not Now and In the Middle on hand as you attempt reading workshop in your own classes. They not only complement each other, they extend each other’s reach. Henry’s book offers teacher-tested, theory-based pedagogy for the college classroom. She reminds us that good reading is authentic, interactive, significant, and aesthetic. If Not Now meets all of these criteria.