practices associated with the "current-traditional" model such as the formulaic "five-paragraph" essay that "suppresses imagination, the value of the individual voice, and individual commitment to values. It betrays our understanding of how children must write to think for themselves . . . and for testing the truth of their own ideas" (226). They credit expressivist, on the other hand, with contributions "not only in the articulation of the writing process, but also in the privileging of self as subject, the student-centered curriculum, [and] the emphasis on making meaning" through student writing (229). As teachers of writing attuned to diversity, we can also "help students learn respect for a wide variety of ways to say things and to express one's self" (234). And here the book takes an ideological turn. Literacy ultimately impacts students' lives in a diverse world beyond the classroom, after all, and their ability to communicate effectively in many other contexts as well. Academic success, the authors remind us, is but one important outcome of learning in school what writing can do.

References


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The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers


Sheridan Blau is the one who always reminded me to notice "noticings." And as I think about how to begin talking about Blau's long-awaited book, The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers, I notice I am using the word talking, rather than writing. Talk seems the operative word for what is a compelling conversation with this consummate teacher/thinker/reader. In The Literature Workshop, Sheridan Blau translates what goes on in his own classroom and workshops for teachers into a text that transcends pedagogy, theory, and research to attain a wide-ranging yet impeccably ordered journey into the rarefied realm of what teaching literature can be.

As a veteran teacher involved with many of the issues that have concerned Sheridan Blau over the years, I have had my share of conversations with this master teacher and educational leader. I worked with him on the difficult problems of how best to design a large-scale assessment of student reading and writing, and we have engaged in passionate dialogue about subjects ranging from how to get at the meaning of a poem to the rationale for ways of using graphics to teach metaphoric thinking. Do we always agree? Often, at the beginning of an exploration, we start from different vantage points: Sheridan is the university academic, and I am the high school teacher; Sheridan is the logician, and I am the poet. We've benefited from the resultant give and take. Where there is initial accord, there is no probing of meanings, no questioning of one's own beliefs, no possibility of reversing one's opening position. There is no room for the "ahah!" that nearly always transpires during a conversation with Sheridan.

And it is this kind of enlightenment that awaits the reader of this text: the excitement of moving beyond one's own perceptions of what reading is, of what the teaching of literature is, to what it can mean to "teach texts and their readers." Be forewarned, however: you can't read this text just once. You will find yourself doing what Blau suggests we all do as readers: reread. It's the rereading of this book that will allow readers to internalize the dimensions, possibilities, and power of Blau's literature workshop.

Blau begins by presenting a "pedagogical epiphany." He describes an encounter with a class of college freshmen early in his teaching career. As he stood in front of this class, he began to wonder why his insights into the particular essay under consideration ran so much deeper than those of the bright young people in his class. And then he recognized that he is the one who had spent the evening before pondering the essay. It was his job to "come to class prepared to discuss the essay in ways that would illuminate its difficulties and advance our inquiry..." (2). As he told the students, any one of them who assumed equal responsibility and applied equal effort could have done as well. This early classroom encounter gave him the impetus for attempting, over his lengthy professional life, to redress a teaching situation in which the experience of learning was the
Editors' note: The Quarterly editors asked Sheridan Blau to write a few words about the process of writing and publishing a book. Below is his response.

On the Experience of Writing The Literature Workshop

BY SHERIDAN BLAU

I completed a first and second draft for the book that became The Literature Workshop during a five-month sabbatical in France, when I wrote over three hundred new pages of prose, most of which survived subsequent revisions. Such productivity may not be unheard of for some writers, but for me it was the most productive period of my writing life. I had never before written so fast, so steadily, or—given how much I felt I was discovering and articulating for the first time in my writing—so well.

My extraordinary productivity during this period I now attribute to a number of enabling conditions that I more or less deliberately created for myself as a writer. The first of them was my decision (or my yielding to my wife’s wisdom) to spend my sabbatical in a rural French village, not so much for the beauty of the place but for its distance from my office. The distance protected me from all the distractions of my ordinary professional responsibilities, and most especially my responsibilities as a writing project site director (which were handled brilliantly by our co-directors). I even shunned email, going online only once a month.

I also succeeded in my writing because I made a tactical rhetorical decision early in my sabbatical about the form and voice I would employ for most of the chapters of my book. I decided to write each chapter as a dramatization of an actual workshop that I had been regularly conducting for teachers. This meant that I knew my audience very well and could trust at the outset that I knew how to speak to them and even knew pretty much what I was going to say and what each chapter would cover. I made the decision to write in dramatic form hesitantly and fearfully at first. Could a book in such a form be taken seriously as a contribution to professional knowledge in my field? Could I manage to explore theoretical issues in sufficient depth within the structure of a dramatized workshop?

I’ll let others answer the first question, but the answer to the second is that the dramatic form of my chapters was more of a stimulus than a constraint in allowing me to address difficult ideas and explore them productively in my writing. The dramatic form invited soliloquies where I could step aside to comment on what had just transpired in the drama and offer reflections and theoretical speculations that were lengthier than anything I ever would or could say under the constraints of limited time that obtain during an actual inservice workshop. And the opportunity to reflect and speculate at some length yielded new and unanticipated insights for me, taking me beyond anything I had thought before in any of my workshops or classes. In this way, my writing process was not merely one of re-creating what I had already experienced with teachers and students, but a process of discovering fresh ideas and questions and confusions, making the act of writing an act of constant discovery and illumination and making my book as valuable for me and, I trust, for my readers, as I had ever dared to imagine.

This brief note does not allow me the space to describe the other conditions that conspired to make my sabbatical so remarkably productive. Nor do I want to excite the envy of my readers by describing my daily three-mile walks through the local vineyards, our trips to ever-fascinating village markets, the meals, the wine, the changing seasons of Southern Provence. I cannot think that I deserved such a gift of time, pleasure, and productivity, but my prayer for my colleagues is that we should all be blessed with such a sabbatical opportunity at least once in our professional lives.

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Blau then moves to the heart of the process he uses in this book, presenting not only a description of what he means by “literature workshop,” but a dramatization of such a workshop in practice. He illustrates how a literature workshop session plays out by presenting a transcript of a discussion among his students as they work through Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up.” Blau comments that a teacher once told him that this poem is impossible to understand unless one understands Wordsworth’s “own brand of Neoplatonism.” “Are all of you familiar with Wordsworth’s Neoplatonism?” Blau asks his students. “Of course, not,” he answers. The text then plunges into the transcript as
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students discuss "My Heart Leaps Up." It becomes clear that students are able to derive truths from the poem without bringing to it any preknowledge of the fine points of English Romanticism and Neoplatonism. I was struck in this example, as I was over and over throughout this text, with how useful it is to come to a poem fresh, even a poem as familiar to me as this one. Blau mixes well-known works with (to me) unknown ones, giving us an opportunity to see the familiar in a new way, and to make the unfamiliar ours, as we apply the strategies of the workshop, even as we read this text.

Throughout the text, Blau credits the writing project model of teacher development that relies on the presentation of pedagogical ideas to colleagues largely as teachers demonstrate lessons that model actual classroom practices, and then encourages reflection on those demonstrations as a way of drawing a rationale or theory for practice. The rationale Blau presents for the writing project model is the most cogent overview I have read, citing as part of the outgrowths of the project the large body of research and theory on the sociocultural dimensions of learning.

Blau's ability to integrate and cite the research that supports the workshop approach in literature as well as writing provides a much-needed grounding for all of us who are attempting to formulate and convey to others our rationale for these practices.

The richness of this text is obvious from the titles of the text's four sections: "Teaching and Learning Literature: Understanding Tradition, Rethinking Practice," "How Readers and Texts Make Meaning," "How to Talk and Write About Literature," "Writing Assignments in Literature Classes: Perennial Problems and Provisional Solutions," and "The Foundations of Literary Knowledge." Readers may want to engage in the rewarding activity of dipping into this text here and there. Others may go immediately to "How to Talk and Write About Literature" or "Writing Assignments in Literature Classes," because these are the everyday facts of our lives. This was my first approach to the book, but then I decided to read it straight through, then reread it. This experience convinced me that each time readers immerse themselves in this text, they will assimilate more of its richness and discover new ways these principles can apply to their work as readers, teachers, and researchers.

It would be impossible to comment on all of the many facets of this text, but I do want to include one dimension that seems to me to be lacking in so much of our practice as a profession: teaching the practice of metacognition of our reading and thinking about literature. Blau deals with how to teach students to become aware, to "notice what they notice" (36), and to record their own thinking as they read (see the "Reading Process Research Report," 170), and he also demonstrates the importance of the practice for teachers in the section "Metaprocessing for Teachers: Reflections on Practice." He states succinctly what I myself have been preaching for years: "If we don't understand the rationale or theory informing a practice, we can easily subvert its purposes or blunt them with the minor revisions we inevitably make as we adapt new practices to our own classrooms" (142). These words reminded me of our work together on the California reading and writing assessment that I referred to earlier. I have in my computer about twenty-nine versions of the rationale for the kind of reading assessment we were attempting to construct. Blau played a vital role in that process; his contributions underscore what I learned during that noteworthy time of teachers working collegially to design new and valid ways of assessing reading and writing (146). If there were ever a need for hard evidence of the benefits of metacognition, these twenty-nine drafts make a strong case.

In the last analysis, The Literature Workshop is a book about conversation: Blau's conversation with his readers; his students' conversations about literature. It is fitting then, as teachers read and reread this text, that they will want to bring the conversation they have begun with it into the classroom, into the teacher's lounge, into their book clubs, and into their own private reading, where with each reading, they will be increasingly likely to "notice what they notice."

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