

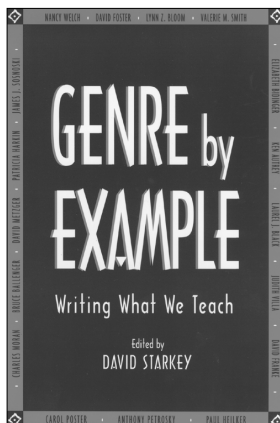
Professional Links

CONNIE S. ZITLOW, EDITOR

MULTIPLE GENRES OF TEACHING AND RESEARCHING

The ideas in the books reviewed for this issue highlight the value of multiple forms of writing, of various teaching approaches, and of diverse research methodologies. Our reading of them can stretch our imagination and extend our thinking about literacy instruction. In Starkey's book, contributors tell about moving beyond conventional approaches to teaching writing. Lee and Smagorinsky's book contains the results of what researchers learned when investigating, from different perspectives, how Lev Vygotsky's ideas apply today. All the authors discourage using one simple approach to teaching and invite teacher-scholars to continue their dialogues.

Imaginative Approaches to Teaching Writing



Genre by Example: Writing What We Teach

Starkey, David, ed.,
Portsmouth, NH:
Boynnton/Cook, 2001.
178 pp. \$23.00
ISBN 0-86709-574-1.

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A spirited, often humorous repartee between editor David Starkey and an imaginary colleague, Vivian, introduces the premise of *Genre by Example: Writing What We Teach*. Their dialogue frames the idea that scholarly discourse should not be limited to the conventional academic essay; instead, we writing teachers need to experiment with alternate genres that give voice and power

to writing. In this, his second book exploring the boundaries of genre, Starkey credits the seminal work of Winston Weathers in *An Alternate Style: Options in Composition* (Hayden, 1980) for inspiring studies in form that attempt to eliminate the line between the academic and creative voice. A helpful list of related titles is included in Starkey's introduction.

Genre consists of fourteen chapters organized into four sections and written by recognized authors in composition studies. The major appeal of this book, wherein the authors ponder and play with genre, is the range of creative models for writing. Each chapter includes (although sometimes indirectly) explanations of the construction, possible uses, limitations, and audiences for genre, ranging from the personal essay to poetry. While designed primarily for instructors of undergraduate English courses, the book is useful for secondary teachers who wish to incorporate alternative writing approaches in their classrooms. Many chapters contain ideas for creating better assignments resulting in more effective, inventive writing.

The significance of words, both said and unsaid, weaves itself throughout the book's first section entitled "Reclaiming a Space for the Personal in Academic Essays." Beginning with a poignant essay, a skeptical author recounts her struggle to continue teaching her students about the power of language after an incurable disease intrudes upon her personal life. As she and her husband wait for his prognosis from "managed care," they discover the inherent irony and limitation of words, when their worst-case scenario proves inadequate: "Worsen," she writes. "Even grammar was against us" (10). When faced with the ultimate inadequacy of words to erase her personal tragedy, she concludes that, even in the face of uncertainty, she cannot teach writing unless she is able to reaffirm that words have power that can positively affect the future.

We see how the personal essay can take many forms. We engage in a metadiscourse with another author who shares how difficult and even painful personal writing can be, as he recounts his embarrassment over a childhood experience that has affected his attempts to relate to his students of color. While writing, he realizes that his own experience with failure extends into his teaching practice, and he is challenged to discover common ground with his students—to honor their authority as writers. His meta-discursive reminiscence is followed by an essay, presented as three interwoven autobiographical

anecdotes, which requires writers to dispense with much of what they have learned about academic writing in order to relearn the art of telling a story. Writers recognize that if words cannot tie up all of the loose ends in their stories, perhaps what they choose to omit in autobiography is as important as what has been written.

In one chapter, excerpts from an author's personal journals show the purposes, uses, and ultimate audience for journal writing. Can we really ever be truthful in our journals, he muses? His own journaling habits have caused him to rework assignments to require students to move beyond basic summary toward more thoughtful response. In the end, incompleteness is, for this author, the consummate attraction and beauty of the journal form. The final chapter in section one is like Campbell's hero quest from which the teachers return, wiser for their experiences, realizing that in their eagerness to impart subject matter they had forgotten how important knowing their students as individuals is to successful teaching.

In the second section, "Planning, Invention, and Revision: New Strategies for Teaching and Writing Essays," the authors offer insights into using the writing process with alternative genres. Beginning with the idea that teachers often do not look at their countless assignments as "real" writing, one author presents a sample syllabus as a model for how ongoing inquiry can inform instruction. Only as a teacher learns to "write backwards" (77) after discussion and reflection on prior semesters does revision of syllabi become meaningful. An examination of the quick-write, through a teacher's rationale, model, and a series of oft-humorous student evaluations, clearly illustrates how reflective comments help teachers assess the clarity and effectiveness of assignments. This section ends with a chapter showing how forms of freewriting enable us to "write badly" in order to bypass our internal critic (86). Handwritten examples, including note taking, double journal entries, quick-writes, and found poetry, show the planning, creation, and revision processes for a paper on Internet research. This chapter employs the idea of writing backwards by ending with a brainstorm for a title, "A Net Full of Nothing" (101).

The third section of *Genre by Example* illustrates various forms requiring at least two participants in "It Takes Two: Dialogues, Arguments, and Letters." In a dialogue on dialogue we learn that knowing what to do forms the bridge between

theory and practice. Dialogue, the author believes, is a thought-machine, serving essentially the same purpose as writing—we converse with ourselves or others to discover what we know, just as we write to open up new conversations. Chapters on uses of argument and the art of letter writing follow the model-based format of this book. Although popular media would have us view argument as a negative element of interpersonal relationships, one author contends that it is an acquired and necessary skill for both academic and cultural settings, affecting our ability to live well. A structured letter illustrates the classical notion of using models as strategies for composition. Learning formulas, the author argues, stylistically frees writers to communicate more effectively.

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The fourth and final section, "Poetry, Fiction, and 'Other' Writing," explores the borders of genre. A poem written in free verse becomes a vehicle for playing with ideas. To exist in an academic setting, rites of passage must prove one can "talk the talk and write the writing" (145). The poem begins with the language of academia, flirts with thoughts of theory and possibilities of alternate genres, and ends with a purely poetic image: ". . . the / cart full of tiny / tangerines and an / old woman, a red / apron, two hands / wet with juice" (151).

A multigenre paper frames the editor's own recollections about teaching a course on postmodern literature to rather mutinous students, who surprised him with their resistance to new ideas. Yet, as writers strive for the new and different, new genres and forms will keep appearing. In the final chapter, this book comes full circle when elements of alternative style are arranged to reflect the differences between conventional Grammar A and its alternative, Grammar B. A comparative list synthesizing opinions of contemporary theorists begins a creative

attempt to describe what lies beyond the doors of convention. As new forms of expression arise, these too become conventionalized, codified, and ultimately contained in a new box of rules. Grammar C, D . . . the possibilities are endless as we keep trying to outrun convention.

A criticism of many writing theorists continues to be that they prescribe rules for writing without enough practical examples to follow. The pleasure inherent in reading Starkey's book is the discovery that here is an admirable experiment combining academic and creative writing in ways that allow "both writer and reader [to] learn about genre through example" (xiii).

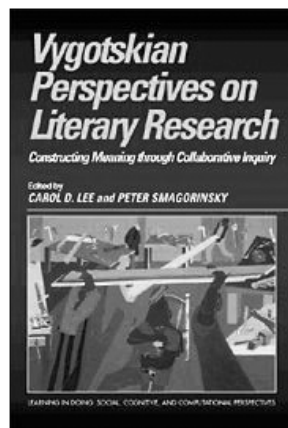
Vygotskian Transformations in Literacy Instruction

Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research: Constructing Meaning through Collaborative Inquiry

Carol Lee and Peter Smagorinsky, eds. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 280 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 0-521-63878-X.

Reviewed by
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As we strive to promote academic innovation with



progressive theories of education, it is almost antithetical that we turn back to the writings of Lev Vygotsky, who researched and wrote in the early 1900s. Vygotsky recognized that learning is inherently dependent on, and intertwined with, the learner's interface with history, culture, and society. He was

passionate and persuasive in his revolution-ridden and isolated part of the world, but over time his theories have come to be respected and emulated in the larger global community. Because of the power and cogence of Vygotsky's theories and his untimely death, theorists and researchers have continued to attempt to interpret and extend his legacy.

One such attempt was the Vygotskian Centennial, which convened in Chicago in 1996, chaired by Carol Lee and Peter Smagorinsky and sponsored

by NCTE. Registrants and speakers began a dialogue about how Vygotskian principles apply to literacy instruction. As a result, seventeen educators from the United States and Canada contributed to this scholarly text, *Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research*, which is a compilation of Vygotskian research "extensions." One contributor, Luis Moll, edited a similar volume of essays, *Vygotsky and Education: Instructional Implications and Applications of Sociocultural Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). Both books tie Vygotskian concepts to current educational concerns and help readers more fully understand and interpret Vygotsky's "extenders."

The cochairs of the centennial, editors of *Vygotskian Perspectives*, are both professors of education. In their comprehensive introduction, they state the purpose of the book: "to draw on Vygotsky and, in the process, transform him to meet new social challenges. They [the contributors] do so by examining literacy practices at diverse sites . . . and by relating Vygotsky's views to those of scholars from a wide spectrum of disciplines . . ." (4). Smagorinsky writes about the anticipated readership of this book:

We hoped that it would be useful for research-oriented educators, whether in universities or K-12 schools. They would need to have some tolerance for a technical theoretical vocabulary and would need to find theoretically-motivated approaches to teaching and learning important. (Personal communication, 2 December 2000)

A reading of this book confirms his observation. It is an excellent resource for students involved in specific research related to any of the foci of the contributors. The quality and scholarship of the individual essays and the book's theoretical depth demand concentration. The content is based on extensive knowledge and analysis of Vygotskian theory and of theories postulated by his colleagues, Alexi Leont'ev and Alexander Luria, and those who came after him, such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Jerome Bruner, Paulo Freire, Howard Gardner, Gordon Wells, and James Wetsch.

Some key words characterize this collection: *diverse*, *Vygotskian*, and *literacy*. The diversity results from each of the contributions coming from different perspectives and focal points. For instance, Gordon Wells writes a well-crafted argument for the necessity of a dialogic mode of interaction and inquiry to promote knowledge transformation

(51–85); Anne Haas Dyson writes about the use of writing and dramatic play in community and societal history making (127–49); and Arnetha F. Ball writes about the need to utilize internalization in teacher preparation to better prepare teachers to understand the students and needs of urban school settings. In their work, the contributors used various research methodologies. Some used meta-analysis; others conducted original qualitative research, including ethnographic studies, videotaped and written data, collection of artifacts, and analysis of discourse and behavior.

Despite the diversity of approaches and perspectives, all the authors are committed to building theory and pedagogy on Vygotskian tenets and applying them to some form of literacy instruction. The key elements of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theoretical framework that are tapped throughout the book include the following: we learn interpsychologically before we learn intrapsychologically; learning is a mutually constructive and complex process; learning is social and dependent on the community; scaffolding provided by a more knowledgeable person is necessary for learning; teaching should extend the student beyond what he or she can do without assistance; prior knowledge is an invaluable link to understanding new knowledge; language is central to learning; and cultural beliefs and history contribute to literacy learning.

Because of the book's diverse nature, it is unfair to generalize the major findings and implications of it as a whole, and probably unjust to reduce comprehensive and thorough essays to cursory summaries. However, it is valid to generate some observations related to how this book can impact teachers. As a literacy specialist who attempts to read, critique, and synthesize theories of learning, I was encouraged to find that Vygotsky struggled with bringing continuity to his synthesis because of competing philosophies. I was struck once again with the sociocultural and historical context that molds and influences how children learn. It discourages simplistic "programs" and "one-size-fits-all" approaches. I was reminded that race, ethnicity, gender, and language variation impact how students learn. The need for universal schooling cannot assume that students will have universal backgrounds, values, and languages. There are levels of commitment that interfere with collaborative learning experiences.

Collaborative inquiry reflects a social construct, but not all students will acquiesce to it. Finally, the zone of proximal development occurs when we take students from independent levels to less comfortable places as we scaffold and support them until they can function independently. Then we start again. Much of what we hope to accomplish in literacy instruction depends on this concept.

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Editors Smagorinsky and Lee feel this book is "dialogic." They suggest that it involves an attempt to "talk back" to Vygotsky and to each other (13) as contributors converse across chapters. Perhaps in Vygotskian terms one can have an intrapsychological or implicit "conversation" with the authors, but the suggestion that they are inquiring collaboratively must rely on a broad definition of "collaboration." The tenor of the book is that of seventeen individuals speaking. Perhaps at the centennial they had true conversations that led the editors to see this volume as an outcome of that dialogue. My dialogue with the book takes the form of questions relating to Vygotskian orthodoxy: Does building on Vygotskian principles threaten the purity of the original work? As researchers and theorists interpret, extend, transform, and modernize, how will we know when their work is no longer truly Vygotskian? My questions are small compared to the enormity of this undertaking. I heartily recommend the book because with its preponderance of theoretical, analytical, and application-based inquiry, it affirms that educators can effectively apply Vygotskian principles to literacy research.