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Stephanie Anne Shelton

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## Review of *Teaching Writing Grades 7-12 in an Era of Assessment: Passion and Practice*

Warner, M. L. & Lovell, J. H. (Eds.). (2014). *Teaching Writing Grades 7-12 in an Era of Assessment: Passion and Practice*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

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Meghan B. Thornton  
University of Georgia

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Although alluding directly to the Common Core State Standards in its title, the chapters of *Teaching Writing Grades 7-12 in an Era of Assessment: Passion and Practice* rely very minimally on Common Core language and standards-based instruction. Instead, talented, reflective teachers offer stories of triumph and of failure wrought with concrete ideas for teaching writing. Thus, the book adopts a more positive focus where teachers are encouraged to consider “the possibilities of writing, rather than its limits” (Warner & Lovell, 2014, p. 51). Though edited by two prominent professors at San Jose State University, Mary Warner and Jonathan Lovell, *Passion and Practice* is essentially written by practicing teachers and consistently highlights student work samples, possibilities for differentiation, and options for evaluation.

In chapter 1, Lovell provides a theoretical framework for the chapters that follow by retracing his steps, so to speak. Beginning with his train wreck experience teaching composition for pre-service English teachers at Teacher’s College, Lovell reviews the various writers and thinkers who shaped his own teaching of writing. Finally, Lovell borrows a maxim from Tim Gunn and advocates that teachers must “make their writing curriculum work for them” (p. 16) in an era of assessment and standards mania. This final appeal provides the focus for the book.

In chapter 2, Mary Warner relies on her experiences with the National Writing Project to suggest that a collegial and collaborative approach to the development of writing curricula and its subsequent instruction, free of “the blame game” (p. 24), is a necessary first step to instilling passion in writing and leading to a “deeper sense of humanity” (p. 32). Writing, thus, must be happening at the level of the teacher *and* the student and must be an empowering, relevant, and creative experience for both.

In chapter 3, three teachers outline their experiences with formulaic writing in high school classrooms. Maria Clinton begins the chapter by identifying three types of writing students she commonly meets, and then outlines three writing practices she has incorporated into her teaching in order to move these students forward. Martin Brandt continues the chapter with a narrative recounting of his early frustrations teaching students who performed their best on rote vocabulary instruction, and demonstrated little engagement with “big, beautiful, eternal abstract questions” (p. 47). After a few stumbles, Brandt was able to strengthen his students’ writing by emphasizing the *function* of grammar, through a technique he termed “Nerd Libs.” Finally, Brook Wallace completes the chapter with an exploration of the various ways nonfiction text analysis can lead to higher levels of expository writing.

Mary Warner writes in chapter 4 about “the power of the actual, rather than the virtual” (p. 104), in relation to student exposure to text. This phrase beautifully describes the chapter’s emphasis on actual teaching practices and resources, as well. Jay Richards argues that reading instruction should prompt students “to answer the question, ‘How has my life been changed because I read this book?’” (p. 78). In his writing, Richards outlines the various methods he uses to scaffold his students to such meaningful text analysis. Further highlighting the actual over the virtual, Brenna Dimas presents her concerns with the traditional literature circles, and recommends a modified version aiming to engage all students in more personal and genuine interactions with text. In her piece on the place and role of independent reading in secondary classrooms, Marie Milner outlines numerous variations on the conventional book report that encourage deeper

considerations of theme and characterization while also allowing students to play with voice and to identify authentic audiences. Building a passion for reading, thus, can translate to richer, more engaged, writing experiences for students.

In the introduction to chapter 5, writers Warner, Cohen, and Milner reflect on their own writing experiences, admitting: “we can’t write what we don’t know” (p. 107). What follows are the lesson plans, mentor texts, and student writing that developed as teachers took their personal writing needs and applied them to the classroom. Using Karen Hesse’s *Witness* as a model, Mary Warner outlines the reader’s theater-type writing activities she employs to help her students both identify and establish voice in their writing. Kathleen Cohen continues the chapter by turning to the unique animal that is middle school. At an age where insecurity is at its peak, Cohen works to create a safe community where students are scaffolded into composing their own personal narratives, while also sharing their work with peers. Finally, Marie Milner heralds the power of a model or mentor text by providing student work samples that highlight students’ abilities to transcend a model structure by developing their own voice. With consistent recognition of English Language Learners, reluctant writers and readers, and students’ overall fear of sharing their work, this chapter provides practical and malleable ideas that practicing teachers need in order to improve their writing instruction.

In chapter 6, teachers Brandy Appling-Jenson, Carolyn Anzia, and Kathleen Gonzalez tout the practical and academic benefits of the “I-Search Paper,” writing that it “encourages [students] to explore their interests within a set structure, preparing them for a lifetime of engaging with information” (p. 130). Middle school teachers Appling-Jenson and Anzia, and high school teacher, Gonzalez, present the “I-Search Paper” as a more engaging, authentic, and personal writing experience for students. They also outline the specific methods they employ to guide students through this unique writing process. At both levels, student choice is paramount, while explicit lessons about interview skills, plagiarism, writing style, and quotation-use are embedded throughout. Ultimately, Appling-Jenson and Anzia find that the work done through the “I-Search” paper “ends up being writing at its best: writing that satisfies Common Core State Standards but also, much more importantly, demonstrates the power of authentic writing about meaningful topics” (p. 138).

Suzanne Murphy, Maria Clinton, and Marie Milner outline their various interpretations of the multigenre writing assignment in chapter 7. Building off the needs and interests of middle school students, Murphy strives to incorporate writing opportunities that “encourage students to mirror themselves and view the larger world” (p. 154). Murphy emphasizes the need for scaffolding when undertaking multigenre work and outlines two units designed to allow students to play with genre before creating a final product. Clinton believes that the “multigenre assignment requires students to actually think about what they are reading and learning, and apply what they have learned, increasing the chances that they will retain the information” (p. 169). Finally, Marie Milner uses a multigenre approach to introduce students to challenging literature, and encourages students to respond through letter writing and the composition of a whole-class essay.

In chapter 8, *Empowering English Language Learners*, Milner writes: “Fear is the single most powerful obstacle to learning” (p. 180). Milner stresses that by lowering the affective filter and

providing challenging academic lessons, teachers can empower ELLs and make them passionate, rather than fearful, writers.

In chapter 9, Suzanne Murphy and Amy Thompson outline the portfolio process they use at the middle school-level, highlighting its central role in student-led parent conferences, while high school teacher Kathleen Gonzalez emphasizes the portfolio's role in teaching students the importance of process (rather than product) in writing. For Murphy and Thompson, the process of organizing their portfolios, determining which pieces demonstrate high-quality work, and setting goals for their writing all encourage students to be active participants in the writing process. Gonzalez encourages students to use and reflect on their portfolio throughout the school year, and ends the year with one-on-one conferences with students. The directions, resources, and templates provided in this chapter are designed to help teachers highlight the writing *process* with their students, rather than the end product.

Echoing the feelings of many English teachers, Kathleen Gonzalez writes, "I've said many times over the years that if it weren't for grading papers I could teach forever" (p. 218). In chapter 10, Gonzalez and Maria Clinton outline some of the time saving methods they have adopted in grading. Clinton, in particular, addresses standards-based grading, writing that "if implemented correctly and explained carefully, [standards-based grading] has the potential to help us manage our paper loads and deliver truly meaningful feedback to students and their families" (p. 228).

*Passion and Practice* is packed with materials, resources, and lesson plans that could be of significant help to practicing and pre-service teachers. However, if the text is truly to serve as a practical tool for teachers, information about the racial, ethnic, and class demographics of contributing teachers' students is necessary. Further, while multigenre work (as outlined in chapter 7) can certainly lead to deeper, more complex understandings of text, multimodal composing is a growing area in literature that I felt deserved serious consideration in this text.

As a former middle school teacher, I was tremendously pleased with the consistent balance Lovell and Warner found between the needs and interests of both middle and high school students. Further, the resources and handouts, specific lesson plans and activities, and options for differentiation that appear throughout the text make it an excellent resource for pre-service and practicing teachers alike. As Kathleen Gonzalez mentioned in her chapter, teachers have very little time to grade the amount of writing they assign to students. This time-crunch was certainly taken into consideration in the writing of this book. *Teaching Writing Grades 7-12 in an Era of Assessment: Passion and Practice* is written with the busy teacher in mind: the writing is consistently succinct, focused, and saturated with practical resources, sample handouts, and recommendations to be put into use tomorrow, if necessary.

Overwhelmingly, current dialogue about the Common Core is negative. While *Passion and Practice* does not deny or combat this, it does attempt to paint the teaching of writing "in an era of assessment" in a more positive and productive light. The writers of this text are not suggesting that teachers must recreate their writing curriculum in order to fit into a new set of objectives. Instead, *Passion and Practice* encourages teachers to move past a focus on the *limits* associated with the Common Core standards, and to look for *possibilities* for their writing instruction: possibilities to instill passion for writing both in themselves and in their students.

## Resources

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