Robbins, Sarah, George Seaman, Kathleen Blake Yancey, and Dede Yow. *Teachers' Writing Groups: Collaborative Inquiry and Reflection for Professional Growth.* **Kennesaw: Kennesaw State University Press, 2006.**

Reviewed by Ed Nagelhout

I begin my review with a confession: I am not an expressivist. While I don't feel the same way about expressivism as Heath Ledger about peas ("I hate peas") when asked to state something "true" in *10 Things I Hate About You*, I find most expressivist products created by writers to be the equivalent of participation trophies: mostly purposeless and mostly about the feelings of the author. Now, before you throw my review across the room, understand that I accept both the appeal and the value of expressivist writing for a number of writing teachers at all levels of education. Peter Elbow, the most widely cited proponent of expressivism, is a clear and persuasive writer, and putting his theories into practice in the classroom is a relatively painless business that offers tangible results for both student and teacher. I get it. I just prefer something like Bruce McComiskey's *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*.

But I admit that Elbow has influenced me as well, for I use portfolios and am a firm believer in critical reflection. I use reflective writing in every course I teach, from Principles of Modern Grammar to Intermediate Composition to Business Writing to Document Design. For me, this kind of writing is best served locally, within a specific context, and for purposes best understood by local (and connected) readers. This kind of writing, like lore and response, should be located with an audience immersed in the context. To try to offer this kind of writing as a product outside its specific context misses out on much of the messiness that makes the work, the **writing** (as activity), so marvelous.

Teachers' Writing Groups: Collaborative Inquiry and Reflection for Professional Growth by Sarah Robbins, George Seaman, Kathleen

Blake Yancey, and Dede Yow is a collection of essays that attempts to offer up the lore and response of a particular context as a product, an idealistic and formalized presentation of everyday practices. I find this action troubling. On the one hand, I do believe wholeheartedly that on some levels this book can live up to the promise of its title, to serve as a model for teachers' writing groups. But at the same time, it also can never be replicated. I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing. I'll let you decide.

To summarize *Teachers' Writing Groups: Collaborative Inquiry and Reflection for Professional Growth*, I want to begin at the end. The last chapter, "Setting Teachers' Writing Groups in Context," provides a purpose and organization, a timeline and structure, more effectively than the "Introduction." While the "Introduction" certainly sets the tone for the whole collection, the first and last chapters should be read together to garner a more complete picture of the scope of the project.

Teachers' Writing Groups operates from a premise that teachers' perceptions of themselves are the key to professional growth and development. Participation in communities of inquiry, using "shared reflection" and "social writing," provide the real keys "to shore up their professional identities." In concluding the collection, the editors offer real inspiration:

> Viewing our colleagues' stories and writing as a powerful source of learning, as well as hearing others respond to our own writing in the same respectful way, all of us came to see our teaching differently, to speak with greater confidence. We used the social process of writing together to learn and grow professionally. We now invite readers to adapt our model for what we expect would be equally powerful results. (194)

But, as I'll explain, the "adaptation" ultimately falls short on application and delivery.

Teachers' Writing Groups drew participants from the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project, Kennesaw State University, and teachers in and around the metro Atlanta area. The collection is divided into five parts: introduction, 3-part body, and conclusion. The introduction situates the larger project firmly in the realm of Donald Schoen and Jean Lave. Their bulleted list of key terms and phrases on page 2 establishes how they want readers to understand the project and the work presented in the collection. They state that their goal is not to provide a "straightforward formula or set of rules for action," but, instead, core principles "that can be enacted through a variety of specific techniques" (7). While pedagogically sound, this approach left the collection wanting, in my mind, on application and delivery because the editors never really incorporated a consistent meta-narrative to help guide readers through the "process" for constructing and supporting teachers' writing groups in their fashion.

The editors nod briefly at a meta-narrative in the conclusion by offering two subsections that describe "other" responding done at later stages of the project. In the first subsection, Linda Stewart, Renee Kaplan, and Deborah Kramb collaborate to offer samples of their responses as readers from other writing groups. Their goal is to show how their response activity worked to situate essays in the larger framework of the project. Their example responses are long, well-considered, and articulate: error-free essays themselves. Zea Boykin, Toby Emert, Sandra Grant, and Scott Smoot, who served as external readers from outside of the project, describe their own "participation" in the project by constructing their responses as open letters to the various educational constituencies: students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

The body of the collection is organized by the three writing groups: Creating Our Professional Identity, Looking Closely at Classroom Practices, and Designing Writing Programs. Each section includes a group-written introduction to the section that reviews the process the group went through to complete the work. These section-introductions work to establish their

controlling theme and explain the obstacles that the group overcame to achieve success. Each section then offers from two to four essays. Each essay is followed by the writer's reflection looking back over the entire process.

The first section—Creating Our Professional Identity—includes Deborah Kramb's balancing act of professional development and her day-to-day work as an elementary school teacher, Carol Harrell's review of how her Kennesaw State students' writing deepened her appreciation of the teacher-as-mentor role, George Seaman's recasting of his own professional identity after introducing portfolios to his high school students, and Dede Yow's plea for compensation for formal and informal mentoring activities, especially at the university level. The second section—Looking Closely at Classroom Practices—includes Renee Kaplan's use of reflection to document and promote student growth and understanding as part of a Holocaust Studies project at her high school and Sarah Robbins and Linda Stewart's application of visual culture strategies for first-year composition students to do research in local communities. The third section—Designing Writing Programs—includes Victoria Walker's employment of wordless books and visual literacy to help her first graders understand narrative structures so that they can "story," Leslie Walker's self-historical examination (and ultimate revision) of her own teaching philosophy that traces her growth from high school student to high school teacher, and Andy Smith's description of a self-study at his local National Writing Project site and the implications of their discoveries. While these summaries are necessarily brief, I want take a bit of time here to highlight important concepts and ideas that arose from these deeply personal essays.

The idea of time, the value of time, and the "power of deadlines" (as all writing teachers can attest) run rampant through all of the sections, but most especially in the first section, for as these authors recommended: "For people to be supported, we had to give each other the gift of time" (19). And while this "gift" is acknowledged incessantly, there is very little time spent

articulating HOW this can be done for other Writers' Groups. The editors and authors model behavior in the book through example, but spend very little time meta-describing application and delivery. They present their local context, but provide precious few particulars on nuts and bolts management techniques that would allow an endeavor such as this one to maintain momentum over time (nearly three years from its inception for this project). I understand that these "communities of inquiry" must necessarily be local constructs, but short of having a committed group of editors like this project, I would appreciate the inclusion of a companion text (or a more consistent meta-narrative) that helps guide the rest of us in replicating or adapting their structure.

I would like to conclude my book review with some thoughts on a crossroads of lore and response, where the lifelong learning of an educator blooms without recognition or compensation. But this crossroads is no different from the one that rose up to meet Robert Johnson (the blues guitarist, not the wonderfully cogent rhetorical theorist).

For me, lore is the lifeblood of our profession, providing what Patty Harkin calls a "narrative knowledge" for constructing our professional lives and our professional identities. Our identities grow more fully through our lore, the sharing of our stories, and allow each of us to develop a tacit awareness for the roles we play every day as writing teachers in the classroom. The real power of *Teachers' Writing Groups: Collaborative Inquiry and Reflection for Professional Growth* is the collaboration among elementary school, middle school, high school and university teachers, who share their stories in an environment of trust and respect. The book emphasizes the importance of regular conversations about our work and the expansion of our local, professional acquaintances. But questions arise: How do we get out of our immediate circle of colleagues? How much time do we have? How much is our time worth? How do we "pay" for this opportunity? What are the rewards? Can we formalize the "process" of our conversations? Should we?

Likewise, putting our conversations (our lore) onto paper means giving primacy to writing as **the** reflective tool in our toolbox. But the editors make a distinction between the informal reflective notes of a teacher and formal reflective writing "opportunities." This, to me, is the unacknowledged "devil" rising up to meet us. When we formalize our lore-driven activities, what do we gain? What do we lose? All writing that is shared insists on a purpose, an audience, and a response. This is non-negotiable. And this belief, for me as a reader, underscores a real weakness in *Teachers' Writing Groups*. All the writing in the book becomes genre-less. In other words, the writing in this book unfailingly blurs (the limited) genre lines present. The introductions, the essays, and the reflections are all narratives in repose. They all only reflect. And too often, these reflections look strikingly similar to reflections I get from over-achieving students trying to convince me of their sincerity: abstract ("I learned a lot"), excessive ("I know that I will ALWAYS be able to apply what I learned"), and self-serving ("My writing will certainly be recognized as great now that I've had this class"). By only offering (primarily) finished products in the book, I missed the messiness — the value — of the processes that these groups went through. While I am quite certain that real engagement occurred in all of the groups, there was no real discussion of dissension or argument or disagreement: "We teachers took 'responding' to mean 'editing' and 'encouraging'" (173). Response is most assuredly more than that, but requires a trust and respect gained over time. And so more questions arise for successful Writing Groups: Why are we writing? What are the products? How do we make the time to write about our practices? How do we make the time to respond effectively? How do we "pay" for this time? What are the "rewards" for writing and response? Once again, a more consistent meta-narrative or a companion text would have been helpful.

In sum, lifelong learning is too often an unrewarded part of our daily work, but our recompense comes through our own critical self-reflection. Formalizing this activity (and publishing it in a

book) is a lofty goal, but writing and teaching circles that operate on campuses around the country are much more modest affairs. *Teachers' Writing Groups* offers some extraordinary tales from dedicated education professionals in the Atlanta area. They model "collaborative inquiry" in ways that are both enlightening and inspiring. But the book, ultimately, fails to offer a map to help guide us through a crossroads of lore and response, to construct teachers' writing groups that will stand the test of time, and to make effective choices through reflection as a part of our professional growth and development.