

DANCING ON SAND: A REVIEW OF NANCIE ATWELL'S *IN THE MIDDLE: WRITING, READING, AND LEARNING WITH ADOLESCENTS*

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Nancie Atwell. *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987), 297 pp.

Some students are encouraged to read more to become better writers. Some are urged to write more to become better readers. Nancie Atwell's students are asked to do both to become better learners. Their teacher has learned through her own experience that reading and writing are mutually dependent processes which, when they become habitual, empower us to understand and use language effectively as an instrument of personal and social growth. She arrived at this point in her thinking gradually over a period of six or eight years through thinking about herself as a private citizen and a public school teacher, through reconsidering her students as both learners and teachers. In this evolution she emerged from behind her teacher's desk and joined her students around the classroom equivalent of her dining room table, the center of literate conversation with her husband Toby and their

friends. There she and her students read and write together in an effort to become more literate people. There, in the midst of her students, in the front of her mind, in the middle of her career, she is no longer a teacher of literature or writing, but a teacher of literacy. *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents* is a chronicle of how this happened to her, an account of what happens in her classroom, and a description of how she keeps track of it all.

The book is organized into four major sections which provide an overall chronology of Atwell's evolution as a teacher of literacy. Section I, "Beginnings," explains the causes of her change from a teacher who maintained the literary/critical tradition common to English departments in American schools and describes her teaching audience, eighth graders in Boothbay Harbor, Maine. Section II, "Writing Workshop," describes the effects in her classroom of the change in attitude which she experienced as a teacher of writing. Section III, "Reading Workshop," is a companion chapter to the preceding one, addressing the questions she encountered in the teaching of reading after she had begun to alter her approach to teaching writing.

The final section of the book, Section IV, "Connecting Writing and Reading," presents the observations she has made in the work of her students as they become increasingly independent writers and readers, applying in one process what they are learning in the other. This section concludes with five stories of how current students have made fundamental connections, which suggests that they now understand at a conscious level what literacy is all about. Atwell concludes the book with ten appendices, which range in content from book lists for the classroom library to suggestions for implementing a workshop program in a given school.

Atwell identifies her subject as "helping adolescents put written language at the crux of their emotional, social, and intellectual worlds," and her purpose as helping other teachers grow with her, "above all, hoping the story of my evolution points to one crucial and heartening message: 'if I've ended up here, anyone can'" (4). She acknowledges a host of influences: Susan Sowers, Dixie Goswami, Lucy Calkins, Donald Murray, Donald Graves, and Mary Ellen Giacobbe, "whose voice," she says, "can be heard throughout this book." More accurately, several voices can be heard throughout this book. I hear the voices of encouragement—Goswami, Sowers,

and Giacobbe; the voices of the author—Atwell as teacher, Atwell as student, and Atwell as the wife of Toby McLeod; and the voices of authority—Murray, Graves, and Calkins.

I am enthusiastic about what Atwell has to say, somewhat less so about how she has chosen to say it. The book provides first hand evidence that writing and reading should be thought of as mutual means for improving literacy; that we should explore every possibility for combining them more meaningfully in our classrooms and that to do so may require our rethinking the relationship between classroom or curriculum management and classroom learning. Equally important, the book provides an excellent model for teacher inquiry, showing how we can combine the roles of teacher and researcher to become teacher-researchers. But I found getting to these ideas—the nitty-gritty of her book—a bit like dancing on sand: refreshing in one way, mildly abrasive in another.

For example, the chapters “Writing Workshop” and “Reading Workshop” are framed by an autobiographical account of how Atwell has grown in her teaching. She begins the book with, “I confess. I started out as a creationist. The first days of every school year I created: for the next thirty-six weeks I maintained my creation. My curriculum. From behind my big desk I set it in motion, managed, and maintained it all year long . . . These days, I learn in my classroom. What happens there has changed: it continually changes. I’ve become an evolutionist, and the curriculum unfolds now as my kids and I learn together” (3). The testimonial which follows details how she became sufficiently enlightened to stop using a traditional classroom format and to start using a workshop format, the stages she went through in her self-appraisal and her relationship with colleagues in her own system, and her current point of view towards herself and others: her mission is to maintain an open mind, continue to evolve in her teaching, and foster a revisionist attitude in others.

I appreciate her openness and honesty; her narrative voices seem genuine. But if her purpose is to demonstrate the value of workshop learning to other teachers and, in turn, persuade them to adopt it, I think the creationist/evolutionist metaphor is an unfortunate choice. First, it establishes anyone in the audience who is still behind the big desk as unenlightened and suggests that although to move from there to the dining room table is a matter

of choice, there will be no feasting until a conversion similar to her own takes place. Though she recognizes that “our authority as teachers of writing can’t be adopted by others on an administrator’s command” (16), and though she recognizes the “half dozen or so teachers at [her] school [who] continue to go their own way” (16), she assumes that a personal testimonial from a fellow-teacher will probably accomplish for others what a mandate won’t.

I am not sure that it will. I have seen enough examples of teachers learning through testimonials—about Robert Mager, Ken Macrorie, Benice McCarthy, Madeline Hunter, and Donald Murray himself, to name a few—and confusing the substance of a teacher’s or a researcher’s work either with the person who did it or with the allure of simplistic routes to magical results cause me to question this technique for helping others negotiate a fundamental change in their teaching. Some do learn this way, but many do not. More, I suspect, learn through subtle realizations that their old tricks have become just that—old tricks—or through the professional osmosis that occurs when people around them are trying new things with some success, when the air gets saturated with professional debate, or when the general morale gets low enough and professional frustration high enough that someone finally calls a meeting. These are all legitimate agents of change which help us understand differences in the rate with which people abandon some ideas and adopt others.

Further, the creationist/evolutionist metaphor contains so much fervor that, in one sense, Atwell becomes a victim of her own testimony and risks alienating some readers: she abandons her creationist role behind the big desk only to become a disciple of a new orthodoxy—the teacher as inquirer, interactor, facilitator—and if you follow me, the heartening and crucial message will become clear. If I ended up here, you can. And should.

I agree. But the tone which emerges from this testimonializing borders on the excessive. Near the end of the book, she offers some observation on orthodoxy: “In one of his best articles Don Graves warns writing teachers that our worst enemy is orthodoxy (1984). When we teach to someone else’s—or even our own—rules about what we and students can and cannot do, we surrender our authority and abrogate our responsibilities as pro-

professionals. Worse, we stop learning. Graves says orthodoxy is a fate we avoid as long as we continue to write and to observe and learn from our students' learning (254) . . ." Then, "Because of what we know we can never again look at literacy learning in the old way, as one small step upon another. Instead, in all the ways we teach we acknowledge the varied, rich, and purposeful processes of writing and reading, and the equally various and rewarding ways our students will learn them. We give them the workshop, that predictable environment that is itself an invitation to openendedness and change. And then we dispel the easy, received truths of orthodoxies, welcome students' diverse processes and intentions, and embrace revision as a way of life" (262).

I found myself thinking of the thirty-five English teachers I supervise and picturing their responses to Atwell's narrative voice. Some of those I would most like to read the book would, I think, be immediately put off by what appears an almost evangelical enthusiasm for her subject. And I think my own colleagues are not unlike the larger audience Atwell hopes to address—a wide range of teachers, some with nearly as much awareness and experience as herself, others uninformed or insecure to the extent that they could hardly yet think of pushing their chairs back from desk, much less leaving if for the messiness of an interactive classroom. As I developed a gradual resistance to this voice, I began to think she may have chosen the wrong genre to display her work and found myself wanting to reshape her text, abandoning autobiography for an equally honest, but more reportorial style like that found in the interior chapters, and restructuring the book to create a stronger focus on the workshop chapters and her method of inquiry.

For example, if she combined Chapter 2, "Making the Best of Adolescence," with Chapters 10 and 11, "Learning to Write From Others" and "Five Stories," under the section "Connecting Writing and Reading" as a follow-up to the sections on "Writing Workshop" and "Reading Workshop," she would enable teachers all along the K-12 continuum to focus on the nature of workshop learning first, consider its potential for their grade level second, and note its relevance to a particular age group last, thus broadening the appeal of the book without depriving middle school teachers of reading about middle school students. As the book now stands, all readers must work through not only the autobiographical

framework, but also the section on teaching middle schoolers before getting to explore her pedagogy and its results. The later chapters—revolution—deserve to replace the earlier ones—evolution.

The really strong part of *In the Middle* (the revolution) is in the middle where “the power of the book is in the details of engagement between a teacher who has brought the full meaning of literacy into the lives of students . . .” (Foreword) and where Nancie Atwell speaks, not as a teacher concerned with her personal development, but as a teacher concerned with the realities of the classroom, the urgency for productive activity, the promise to her teaching and ours of carefully charted classroom research. For she shows, painstakingly, and very clearly, how she has assimilated the ideas about process writing of Murray, Graves, and Calkins, the practice of Giacobbe and Goswami, and made them her own—incorporating them with her personal frame of reference, with her students, in her community to produce good solid classroom data which enables her to revise her teaching from time to time. That she has done so with middle school students is even more noteworthy, for she addresses an age group heretofore largely ignored in literacy research and reveals the feasibility of similar undertakings with high school students.

Though Graves is right to caution that “readers looking for step-by-step approaches to a sure-fire literary program will be disappointed” (Foreword), those same readers can benefit immensely by reflecting on Atwell’s common sense planning to create a predictable and comfortable environment for her students where she can comfortably record their unpredictable, individual habits, insights, and problems without intruding on their learning. Her chapters on preparing for the writing and reading workshops are models, both of what good teachers attempt on their very best days and what excellent teachers sustain over a period of days, weeks, and months.

For example, she begins with clearly formulated philosophical positions on how writers and readers learn. She lists seven principles which form the basis for her writing workshop:

1. Writers need regular chunks of time.
2. Writers need their own topics.
3. Writers need response.

4. Writers learn mechanics in context.
5. Children need to know adults who write.
6. Writers need to read.
7. Writing teachers need to take responsibility for their knowledge and teaching. (17-18)

She reduces these seven to Giacobbe's "three big basics"—time, ownership, and response: allowing students predictable, routine segments of time to consider and reconsider what to write about, what they're writing, and what they have yet to write; and giving students genuine ownership for the content and form of their writing (54).

She then determines the components, both pedagogical and environmental, which will best serve these ends. Into each class hour she builds four unchanging activities: a mini-lesson (borrowed from Calkins), which she regularly uses to teach a single skill; a status-of-the-class conference (borrowed from Graves) in which she maps each student's plans for the day; the writer's workshop (guidelines borrowed from Giacobbe and Calkins); and the group-share, which brings the workshop to a close with talk about ways of listening and responding to writers (77).

Implementing the components requires a physical environment which students can rely upon—a fixed location for writing folders, a fixed procedure for passing manuscripts to teacher or other students, a fixed location for conferring with another student, a fixed area for group-share sessions. When all the procedures of the workshop are in place, students understand how to go about the individual and collective business of learning to write.

Thus Atwell is able to map by the week her students' individual activities, help them establish short- and long-term goals (also a matter of routine record), and watch for individual and group patterns of learning or learning needs. The virtue of her approach is obvious: she is able to teach and research simultaneously without allowing one role to interfere with the other.

The Reading Workshop is designed in the same manner as the Writing Workshop: it includes mini-lessons, sustained silent reading time, the use of dialogue journals, individual conferences, and commensurate procedures for following class guidelines and keeping records. She builds this workshop on the same theoretical

framework of time, ownership, and response which she uses in the Writing Workshop and on ideas she has assimilated from the research of Frank Smith in reading and Jana Staton in the use of dialogue journals (164).

She views reading as a process similar to that of writing in which the learner rehearses, plans, and predicts; drafts and discovers meaning; and revises, re-sees, and re-seeks meaning (155). And she lists twenty-one things which teachers demonstrate about reading that undermine this process, from suggesting that reading is difficult, serious business, to conveying that readers break whole texts into separate pieces to be read and dissected one fragment at a time, to implying that there's another kind of reading, a fun, satisfying kind you can do in your free time outside of school (152-53).

With very specific classroom guidelines and various mini-lesson aids, her students spend the bulk of Reading Workshop in sustained silent reading, "the most questioned part of her teaching" (158). Yet she reasons, correctly I think, that "when reading doesn't happen at school, it's unlikely to happen away from school, which means it's unlikely to happen at all" (156). It is important to note, too, that when her students are involved in this activity, so is she; she participates in every classroom activity with them instead of using their time to address her personal agenda.

Not only is the content of these major middle sections of the book strongly grounded in current theory (her discipleship could be linked to worse leaders than Murray, Graves, and Calkins!), but the procedures Atwell follows are meticulously thought out, orchestrated, and implemented. As Graves remarked to her, "You know what makes you such a good teacher? . . . You're so damned organized" (53-54). She must be. For in the Writing Workshop she must be free to concentrate fully on group and individual needs, behaviors, plans, drafts, mini-lessons, conferences, materials, etc. In Reading Workshop her mind must be free to call up dozens of characters, conflicts, and narrative techniques from dozens of books, to decide quickly how best to respond to questions about genre, voice, form, and meaning. And she must have firmly in place classroom procedures which enable students to take fullest advantage of the responsibility they have been given as emerging literate adults. She proves to anyone's satisfaction in these chapters that she is far more interested in helping students

than in devising labor-saving lessonplans: she and the students maintain a remarkably high energy level.

Though many teachers have more constraints on their teaching than Atwell (she has her own room, only 75 students, and she sees them two periods a day), there is still much to learn or borrow from her. And the substance of her book is ultimately more important than her manner of presentation; as an interested reader, I am able to forgive what was for me the annoyance of voice in order to enjoy the benefit of what that voice has to say.

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REFERENCES

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