

Book Review

Resources for Teaching Basic Writing and Developmental Reading

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Armstrong, S.L., Stahl, N.A., & Boylan, H.R. (Eds.). (2014). *Teaching developmental reading: Historical, theoretical, and practical background readings* (2nd ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. [562 pp. US \$20 (paperback)]

Bernstein, S.N. (Ed.). (2013). *Teaching developmental writing: Background readings* (4th ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. [448 pp. US \$20 (paperback)]

The week before classes started at the local community college, my alma mater, the English department chair asked me to teach an unstaffed basic writing course. At the time, I was finishing my master's thesis on nineteenth-century British literature but I had never taught a class, nor had I, at that point, taken any courses in Rhetoric and Composition or Basic Writing. When I arrived at the chair's office, she handed me the department syllabus with a copy of the textbook *Real Writing* (Anker, 2001) along with some ancillary materials and encouraged me to chat with the adjuncts in the office I'd be sharing. That was that. I'm often haunted by the disservice I did students during my first year teaching. And while my introduction to the profession is perhaps not unusual, particularly in light of the reliance on adjunct instructors for writing and reading classes, it is also not conducive to sound, effective pedagogical practices informed by decades of writing and reading scholarship. An instructor in training could benefit from a

strategic collection of essays that connects this scholarship with classroom practices. Had Bernstein's (2013) *Teaching Developmental Writing: Background Readings* and Armstrong, Stahl, and Boylan's (2014) *Teaching Developmental Reading: Historical, Theoretical, and Practical Background Readings* been included in that introductory stack of materials, both my students and I would have fared better.

Teaching Developmental Writing: Background Readings

Bernstein's (2013) fourth edition of *Teaching Developmental Writing* is a carefully constructed text that aims in each of its four sections to prepare basic writing instructors to be successful teachers, informed campus advocates, and active participants in the discipline. These sections provide the book with its main themes on "Basic Writing: Perspectives from the Field," "Literacy and Literacies," "Engaging Difference," and

“Collaboration, Assessment and Change.” Within each of these sections, Bernstein has organized chapters of two to four landmark essays that highlight specific issues such as “Processes of Writing Research” and “Classic Perspectives on Multicultural Learning.” For example, in “Basic Writing: Perspectives from the Field,” Bernstein’s collection situates the field of basic writing and its students within a historical context. Through key texts from Mina Shaughnessy, Adrienne Rich, and Mike Rose, Bernstein challenges widely held misconceptions about basic writing and basic writers—from the source of student failure to the appropriate level of work to expect and assign. In so doing, Bernstein provides teacher-scholars with a theoretical foundation for the rest of the text and, as importantly, to promote good pedagogical practice based on the critical tenets of the field: that the presence of basic writers is neither new nor indicative of a literacy crisis; that basic writers’ difficulties are not caused by some deficiency in the writer but rather by social and educational inequities; that lack of familiarity or finesse with academic discourse does not constitute illiteracy or signify the lack of cognitive skills; and that basic writing students can manage and should be challenged with complex, sophisticated texts.

As is the case throughout the book, though, the selected articles are not only vehicles for teaching advice and conveying historical and theoretical background. In addition, Bernstein is careful to articulate how the pieces in *Teaching Developmental Writing* can be used to respond to ever-present challenges to the legitimacy of the field and student worthiness, including “the current trend of downsizing and outsourcing basic writing courses” (p. 5). With increased sociopolitical attention on basic writers and their academic success, this is a vital aspect of teacher preparation.

Those looking for practical advice and assignment ideas will find part two of the book rich with tested strategies and curricula that have proven effective with various populations of basic writing students. From individual assignments to entire course models, the

“Literacy and Literacies” section of Bernstein’s text offers experienced instructors possibilities for revised courses and provides novice instructors with models to start from as their preferences and styles evolve. Articles in these chapters introduce multimodal strategies for the composing process, recommendations for reading materials and accompanying assignments, and curricular options that account for differences in contextualized literacies and discourse communities, as well as the role of technology in basic writing. This section of the book is particularly valuable, theoretically and practically. As some developmental writing programs continue to work from limited, simplistic definitions of literacy, the pieces in this chapter work to complicate those definitions and to instead present literacy as a “complex set of practices that take years to develop” (Sánchez & Paulson, p. 115). Unlike courses in which students complete grammar drills and an exit exam, courses arising from this more intricate understanding of literacy—and its accompanying faith in students’ cognitive skills—would teach students “not only how to read and write academic texts, but also how to examine critically the discourse that makes up their world(s)” (Sánchez & Paulson, p. 115). This chapter offers assignments and strategies to do just that through readings on topics such as the writing process, critical language awareness, and rhetorical grammar. To be clear, this section does not eschew grammar instruction altogether; instead, it promotes a functional, rhetorical approach—one that “takes seriously the connection between writing and thinking, the interwoven relationship between what we say and how we say it” (Micciche, p. 222). With this collection, Bernstein offers instructors a wealth of practical teaching ideas supported by sound theory, and also equips them to advocate for programmatic change where needed.

“Engaging Difference,” the third part of the book, prepares instructors to deal with the diversity of the basic writing classroom. One difficulty of teaching basic writing is addressing the different needs arising from the various

reasons students might be placed into the course: socioeconomic, learning disabilities, and native language differences are among the possibilities. This section offers perspectives on those categories of difference and how their interactions with language and academic discourse shape student experiences in basic writing classrooms. It also provides instructors with assignment ideas and pedagogical methods that answer bell hooks's call for "practical discussion of ways classroom settings can be transformed so that the learning experience is inclusive" (p. 270). At the beginning of the book, Adrienne Rich explains that her encounters with work describing effective assignments often felt "useless" because "X is not myself and X's students are not my students, nor are my students of this fall the same as my students of last spring" (p. 24). While that is a fair observation, bell hooks' attention to inclusiveness and Patrick Bruch's advocacy for universal design for learning in this section are useful regardless of how diverse or how homogenous a student population might be. Still, this third part of *Teaching Developmental Writing* is likely best used as a reference for instructors to revisit each semester with each new group of students.

The section on "Collaboration, Assessment and Change" is focused on timely concerns that are most obviously useful for those running basic writing programs; however, this section also serves instructors with coverage of where the field is headed. For example, the three articles in Chapter 11 (Hughes, Gallespie, & Kale; International Writing Centers Association; and Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carrol, & Boquet) take up the topic of writing centers, presenting a compelling case for the merits of peer tutoring—an important collaborative opportunity for basic writers. Bernstein notes the critical role administrators play in supporting the writing center, and that support is also integral to the assessment and alternative models of basic writing covered in the readings included in Chapter 12 (Otte & Mlynarczyk; Addams, Gearhart, Miller, & Roberts; and Glau). The chapter's articles covering those alternative models—stretch and

accelerated—include compelling success rates that should be of interest to instructors and administrators in any basic writing program with less than desirable retention and completion rates.

Bernstein closes with a section on "Resources for Teaching and Research," an insightful guide to being a professional in the field that could help instructors find ways to situate their work beyond their individual classrooms. Bernstein also offers advice on conference proposals, student and program advocacy, and teaching considerations from syllabus design to paper feedback.

The book itself, its subject matter and its component readings, are all carefully contextualized within the field of basic writing and within the larger sociocultural and political climate. This multifaceted approach is one of many signs in the text suggesting Bernstein's critical awareness of the field's concerns, not only in terms of educators' instructional needs but also in terms of the demands placed on teacher-scholars outside of the classroom.

Teaching Developmental Reading: Historical, Theoretical, and Practical Background Readings

In this second edition of *Teaching Developmental Reading* (2014) Armstrong, Stahl, and Boylan have opted to present a survey of scholarship. Driven by a desire to "improve the quality of what goes on in the developmental reading classroom between individual instructors and their students" (p. 4), this book does not promote one view of reading or one clear set of best practices; instead, it provides options to serve different philosophies. The editors frame this approach as honoring the field's history, presenting the book as "a call to know the past in order to inform a more productive and student-centered present and anticipate a future with an even stronger field of college reading" (p. iv). The collection addresses issues important to the teaching of reading, the preparation of instructors to deal with issues they may not anticipate as they plan to teach

developmental reading, and also offers some easily adoptable assignment ideas. However, by trying to offer a comprehensive view of the field, as opposed to one with a focused pedagogical approach, this survey approach could somewhat limit the book's effectiveness as a guide for new instructors.

In "Critiquing the Need to Eliminate Remediation: Lessons from San Francisco State," Sugie Goen-Salter identifies the "persistent tendency in literacy education to treat reading and writing as distinct and separate processes" (p. 201). According to Goen-Salter, the problem in doing so is that the two are neither distinct nor separate; rather, reading and writing are intimately and inextricably linked. Citing several studies that illustrate the connection between reading and writing, as well as the educational benefits of teaching the two together, Goen-Salter heeds Kathleen McCormick's "warning that when reading and writing are taught as separate subjects, these beneficial effects are all but lost" (p. 201). The connection between reading and writing is theoretically sound and well-established across disciplines. Yet, with some notable exceptions—including Goen-Salter's discussion of the elimination of remediation, Dolores Perin's claims about learning through contextualization, Katie Hern's arguments for accelerating developmental English and math, and Lisa Schade Eckert's observations about links between secondary and postsecondary literacy instruction—*Teaching Developmental Reading* generally promotes the independence of reading as well as developmental education's pairing of reading with study skills/learning strategies. This is an important point of contention. In one philosophy, reading is a complex sociocultural set of practices entwined with writing, but in another, reading is simply a linguistic skill that involves decoding and comprehension.

These different definitions, and the practices arising from them, are part of the field's history; however, for novice instructors in particular, the presence of articles supporting both definitions may read discordantly and cause some confusion. The

selections from Chapter 4, for instance, are concerned with "Structuring Postsecondary Reading." The articles in this chapter call for an integrated approach to literacy instruction, one that utilizes intertextuality and contextualized learning as opposed to skill-and-drill exercises and direct instruction. Yet Chapter 6, "Instruction from Vocabulary to Comprehension," includes articles that espouse the pedagogical merits of vocabulary drills, which seems to contradict the earlier section's emphasis on intertextuality and contextualized learning. Because the text offers some competing perspectives as part of its survey of the scholarship, the collection is probably best suited for experienced instructors seeking additional professional development or novice instructors interested in the historical development of the field. A first-time instructor looking for guidance in structuring a course would need to choose carefully among the different options and understand their differences in order for the book to be useful in that way.

Within their historical focus, Armstrong, Stahl, and Boylan are surely wise to cover a very current issue—the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and its impact on developmental reading instruction today. Chapter 2, "Cross-Level Conversations," calls for increased dialogue between postsecondary and secondary educators, particularly in light of CCSS. This is a timely topic and one that will likely affect programmatic curricular decisions at most institutions. The articles in this section make a good case for open lines of discussion between secondary and postsecondary educators. Outside of the immediate concern with the CCSS, the work in this chapter also convincingly challenges popular misconceptions about literacy acquisition. Patricia Alexander's "The Path to Competence" is particularly well-suited for this, arguing for an understanding of reading development as a "lifelong journey that unfolds in multiple stages" (p. 60). In general, this chapter arms instructors with a way to discuss their work and the positions of their students without unnecessarily blaming or

distancing students' previous educators. As importantly, it builds a foundation for an understanding of academic literacy acquisition that should shape the work of developmental reading and writing instructors.

Like Bernstein's "Engaging Difference" section, Chapter 3, "Student Population and Diversity," takes up the critical issue of diversity. As noted previously, this is an important topic in developmental classrooms and one that is difficult to prepare instructors for, particularly as the populations and challenges often change from one class to the next. This chapter is not quite as extensive as Bernstein's unit, but it does adequately prepare instructors to address core concerns, such as anticipating reading and writing issues arising from racial differences, native language differences, and learning differences. While only one piece—Ellen Engstrom's "Reading, Writing, and Assistive Technology"—offers specific strategies and assignment ideas, the articles in this chapter provide a sound theoretical basis upon which instructors might successfully build an inclusive curriculum.

Chapter 4, "Structuring Postsecondary Reading," is the most useful chapter of the book in terms of whole-program and curricular choices for reading courses. Depending on the flexibility of their programs, individual instructors could use the readings in this chapter to design a course based on the more complex definition of literacy supported by research, like the earlier referenced work of Goen-Salter. The selections gathered in this chapter would likely be most useful in advocating for programmatic change or designing a new curriculum. Indeed, Elaine DeLott Baker, Laura Hope, and Kelley Karandjeff's article, "Contextualized Teaching and Learning," with its coverage of several successful models at different institutions, would be an ideal starting point for those considering alternate curricular models for developmental reading instruction.

Instructors seeking useful and direct pedagogical advice will find it in Chapter 6, "Instruction: From Vocabulary to

Comprehension." Marty Fraley, Greta Buck-Rodriguez, and Patricia Anders make a case for the use of Nancie Atwell's literary letters approach for inviting student responses to popular fiction. This assignment incorporates reading and writing and creates a dialogue and community around shared reading and writing experiences. Similarly, Eric Paulson's piece, "Self-Selected Reading for Enjoyment as a College Developmental Reading Approach," offers a curriculum recommendation that leads students to learn organically the literacy skills required for academic success and, simultaneously, to become lifelong readers. While the article doesn't include specific assignments or suggested reading lists, Paulson troubleshoots challenges to a college reading program so that interested instructors are prepared to make a program structured around the enjoyment of reading a success. These articles, in combination with Engstrom's course model, which includes a syllabus, could serve new instructors with a solid start to an effective reading course.

Like *Teaching Developmental Writing*, *Teaching Developmental Reading* closes with chapters on placement and assessment as well as professional development and resources, all of which are designed to help instructors be active and successful as professionals in the field.

The unpredictability of enrollment on many campuses, paired with the increase of contingent faculty hired to teach basic writing and developmental reading courses, means that last-minute hiring of frequently inexperienced instructors will likely continue. And although program administrators are coming around to the understanding that developmental courses demand more—and not less—experienced instructors, there are not often enough of those teacher-scholars available to staff developmental course offerings. Together, these two collections can be used to familiarize faculty with pertinent scholarship and to prepare them to be successful professionals. Bernstein's book is more careful in guiding instructors with a

unified text and direction while Armstrong, Stahl, and Boylan have produced a text that pays homage to early work in the field so that readers are familiar with how theories and practices have evolved. Most importantly, however, both books recognize the necessity of ongoing professional development and provide that vital groundwork, including

abundant recommendations for further reading. Novice instructors, veteran instructors, administrators, and graduate students in these and related fields will all find something of value in the two collections, and students will ultimately benefit from instructors who are knowledgeable about this research. **JCLL**

References

Anker, Susan. (Ed.). (2001). *Real writing with readings: Paragraphs and essays for college, work, and everyday life* (2nd ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.