



Read Like a Teacher of Writing is an excerpt from *What You Know by Heart: How to Develop Curriculum for Your Writing Workshop* by Katie Wood Ray.

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Read Like a Teacher of Writing

I am sitting in the kitchen having breakfast and looking at the morning paper. There's an editorial by one of my favorite syndicated writers, Leonard Pitts of the *Miami Herald*. In our local paper the piece has been titled, "Offended by the News Media? We're So Sorry!" The piece is about the chairman of Viacom Inc., Sumner Redstone's admonition to members of the news media to take more care to report the news without being "unnecessarily offensive to foreign governments." About a third of the way through the piece Pitts states that he's decided Redstone has a point. Pitts writes:

Think of all the times news media have reported on desperate Cubans sailing away on inner tubes to escape that prison island, all the times we've described the hunger, poverty and incidental cruelties of life in that nation. Yet we never once stopped to think how this might make Castro feel. How thoughtless we were. Soulless dictators are human, too. (Pitts 1999, A7)

As the piece continues, it becomes increasingly clear that Pitts is actually making an argument that is clearly opposite from what he really believes. By the end of the piece, he has, sarcastically, apologized for possible offenses to everyone from human rights violators to drunk drivers to child molesters to Charles Manson.

I get up in the middle of my breakfast and go and get the scissors. I have to show this my students, I think. This is such an interesting way to pose an argument—as if you actually agree with the opposing side . . .

* * *

In Part One of this book, we explored what it means to write like teachers of writing. To write like the kinds of people we are so that we have curriculum knowledge about the *process* of writing that runs true and deep in our teaching. Now we want to take that same idea and think about it with reading. How do teachers of writing *read* so that they develop curriculum knowledge about the products of writing? Whenever I think about this question, I always think about Mara.

Mara, a first-grade teacher, was driving along a winding rural road once after a lunch out with friends. She was chatting away with the two of them who had hitched rides with her when, suddenly, in the middle of the conversation, she slammed on the brakes and pulled to the roadside. Mara jumped out of the car without a word, her two friends gaping. She went behind the car and disappeared just a little ways down an embankment, then came back up pulling a huge, appliance-sized empty box behind her. She lifted the back of her SUV, slid the box in, slammed it closed, jumped back in the driver's seat, put it in gear, and finished the sentence she had left undone before all this happened. When finally someone else could get a word in, she asked, "Uh, Mara. What are you going to do with that box?"

"I don't know," Mara said. "I'll take it to school. The kids will figure out something interesting to do with it."

Mara *drives* through the world like a first-grade teacher. She is constantly on the lookout for things that have potential. Often, she doesn't even know what that potential might be exactly, but she knows her students well enough and she understands what she wants for them deeply enough to recognize potential when she sees it. So she stops whatever she is doing and gathers it and then can't wait

for the day she can take it into her classroom and see what her students will make of it.

I think this is what it means to read like teachers of writing.

We read like Mara drives.

The world is full of writing that makes us slam on our brakes when we're reading and think, *Ooo . . . look at that. I need to show that to my students. That's really good writing.* That's what happened that morning as I read Leonard Pitts' editorial and left my breakfast to go get the scissors. I wasn't any more thinking about teaching that morning than Mara was out driving with friends. I was just having breakfast and reading the morning paper. But I can't help it, I read like a teacher of writing. That's who I am. And when I happen upon some really good stuff, I have to gather it for my teaching.

Magazines, newspapers, memos, novels, billboards, email messages, lyrics, letters, poems, short stories. Every time we see writing, we are seeing what we

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Think about your reading life. You probably don't need to get a different one. You just need to learn to read a little differently inside the reading life you already have. What kinds of things do you read on a regular basis? Make a list of your "regular reading" because this is where you'll start your curriculum development for products.

teach. We are seeing examples of what's possible in writing, and so we have to read the texts we encounter across our lives differently than other people. We read these texts like teachers of writing. We are on the lookout for interesting ways to approach the writing, interesting ways to craft sentences and paragraphs and whole texts, interesting ways to bring characters to life or make time move or get a point across. When we read, we are always on the lookout—whether we intend to be or not—for interesting things we might teach our students how to do.

It's a Lot Like How Writers Read

To think about how a teacher of writing would read, it might be easiest to start by thinking about how a writer would read. This is a concept many of us have

used to help our students study the craft of written texts. We teach them to *read like writers*, but only after we have helped them become *like that*—like someone who writes. Like writers.

We begin by making predictable spaces and times in our classrooms where students write every single day. We encourage them to find ideas and to turn those ideas into all kinds of writing—poems, short stories, memoirs, essays. We share lots of this writing so that students grow accustomed to going public with writing. We set things up so that students write so much and so routinely that they come to see themselves as *people who write*. Out of their daily experiences, they develop a history and an identity as this kind of person and come to know themselves in this way. *I am a great poet. The best thing I've written is my article about soccer camp. Someday I'd like to write a novel. I have trouble with endings. Action is my forté.* They also come to know that, at least as long as they are with us, they are going to continue to be people who write and publish, and so they better start figuring out what they will write next.

Once our students have this identity, then we can begin to teach them to read like people who write. I often use the metaphor of a seamstress in a dress shop to explain how writers read differently than people who don't write. I tell students:

Because my friend is a seamstress, she goes to the mall or to the dress shops differently than the rest of us who aren't seamstresses. First, it takes her a lot longer than a normal person to make her way through the store. She turns the dresses and jumpers and shirts inside out, sometimes sitting right down on the floor to study how something is made. While the rest of us mere shoppers are looking only at sizes and prices, my friend is looking closely at inseams and stitching and "cuts on the bias." She wants to know how what she sees was made, how it was put together. And the frustrating thing for anyone shopping with her is that as long as it takes her, she hardly ever buys anything! You see, my friend's not shopping for clothes, she's shopping for *ideas* for clothes. After a day at the mall she goes home

with a head full of new ideas for what she might make next on her trusty sewing machine. (Ray 1999, 13)

My friend shops differently because of who she is, a seamstress. Because sewing is something she does, she sees possibilities for her own work every time she looks closely at the work of other seamstresses. This is the way a writer reads. Writers can't help but notice how things are written as they read because every encounter with a written text is an opportunity to learn their craft.

Frank Smith says that when writers read they are always learning how written language works, how it goes. "The learning," Smith says, "is unconscious, effortless, incidental, vicarious, and essentially collaborative" (Smith 1988, 21). And just look at what writers say in response to the question, "What advice would you give someone who wants to write?" I have dozens and dozens of quotes from different writers responding to this question and they almost all say some version of, "Read. You need to read widely if you want to be a writer."

The jump, then, is not a long one. We know that we must also read widely if we are to be teachers of writing. And we can't just read, we have to read like the people we are. We have to read with a sense of the future, knowing that any time we're reading stories or editorials or poems, it is just a matter of time before we'll be teaching our students how to write stories and editorials and poems.

Text as Curriculum Potential: What Can We Learn from Single Texts

Every act of reading, then, can essentially be an act of curriculum development for us as teachers of writing. Every single text we encounter represents a whole chunk of curriculum, a whole set of things to know about writing. Every single text has a beginning, middle, and end, and some way to get from one to the other. Every single text has words formed into sentences, and many have sentences chunked into paragraphs. All texts are demonstrations of some writer's decisions about word choice, voice, perspective. All texts are demonstrations of some genre

potential. All texts are demonstrations of how our language works and its conventions. Most all texts have punctuation and capitalization . . . every single text is a whole chunk of curriculum potential.

As teachers of writing, over time we develop a sort of general habit of mind that always asks of the well-written texts we encounter, “Okay, now how’s this written?” Sometimes we ask this question very deliberately as we are reading purposefully as teachers of writing, studying the kinds of texts we are going to teach our students how to write. And sometimes the question just occurs to us when we’re reading for other reasons—as I was at breakfast that morning. We think to ourselves in the midst of that reading, *Hmm . . . look at how that’s written.* This habit of mind leads us to all we need to know about how our written language works and how a writer makes it work well.

With the curriculum of process, we want to know what kinds of things writers think about and what kinds of things they do as they find ideas, grow those ideas into drafts, and then revise and edit those drafts for publication. In contrast, with the curriculum of products, we need specific knowledge about how all kinds of written texts *work*. We are always using that general question, “How’s this written?” to develop this curriculum knowledge, but we find that as we ask that question we are led again and again to look at particular aspects of the workings of texts.

For example, imagine having a single, well-written text in our hands. We can look very specifically at that text and find out all kinds of things about writing. We can ask questions of that text like these:

General Approach to the Writing

- ◆ What’s the piece about? How does this help us think about topic selection?

Thinking It Through...



Before reading the questions that follow, you might want to get a familiar text (any kind of writing) in your hands. It should be one you know well and think is a smashing example of good writing. As you read on, look between your text and these questions and see what curriculum your text has to offer.

- ◆ What is the approach to the writing? Is there more than one form operating in the piece?
- ◆ What do we think the author was intending to do with this piece of writing? Tell a story? Describe? Celebrate? Share a memory? Make a point? Compare two things? Help us see something in a new way? Provide information? Etc., etc., etc. . . . How does this help us think about the work different forms of writing can do?
- ◆ How is the piece focused? What's included, and what do you think has been left out?
- ◆ Who is narrating the piece?
- ◆ What genre-specific things can you learn from looking at this piece? For example, what does it teach you about character development in a piece of fiction or placement of your argument in an editorial, etc.?

Construction of the Text

- ◆ How does the title relate to the text?
- ◆ How does it start?
- ◆ How does it end?
- ◆ Looking at the text as a whole, what different parts do we see? How do the parts of it work together? How does the text *move*?
- ◆ Are there parts embedded within parts—dialogue, side stories, explanations, etc.

Making the Language Work

- ◆ What interesting work are the various parts of speech doing in the text: verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, interjections, prepositions?
- ◆ What is the writer doing with sentences in the text?
- ◆ What interesting punctuation choices has the writer made in this

text? How is the punctuation supporting the meaning and the sound of the text?

- ◆ If the text is divided into paragraphs, what paragraph work do you see the writer doing?
- ◆ Does the writer manipulate any conventions to make meanings?
- ◆ Is print used in any interesting ways to convey meaning?
- ◆ Which parts of the text have really nice *sound*? What's the writer doing in these places?

Questions of Picture Books Specifically

- ◆ What is the overall approach to the illustrations?
- ◆ How are the illustrations used to make meaning in the text?
- ◆ What work do the illustrations do independently of the written text?
- ◆ Where are the words in relation to the illustrations?
- ◆ Do the illustrations seem to operate in any structured way? Do they work together a certain way?
- ◆ What are the focal points of the illustrations and how do they relate to the text? What decisions has the illustrator made about focus?

Most texts give us at least one answer to all these questions, and every one of those answers is something we can know about writing—its curriculum. For a beginning example (we'll look at lots more in later chapters), let's say we are studying Bob Graham's book *"Let's Get a Pup!" Said Kate* (2001) and we think there's this one part where the writing has a really neat sound to it. It comes right after the family in the book sees Dave, the puppy they will eventually take home from the pound. The part we like goes like this and is spaced on the page like this:

He was small.

He was cute.

He was brand-new.

When we think about what the writer is doing, we realize he has chosen not to use his sentence-combining skills for these three details and has instead written three short sentences in a row and constructed them exactly the same way. We also notice that the adjectives have about the same number of syllables—one, one, and two. The sentences have a nice rhythm to them, and now we know one specific way to make writing have nice rhythm: *you can write a series of short sentences using the same sentence construction for each, and using words with about the same number of syllables.*

When we study texts with questions like these in mind, every answer is curriculum, and this is why a single well-written text is so full of potential. Now the trick, of course, is to remember that while most any text can give us answers to all these questions, it is only *one* text. If we stack five texts up, say five feature articles, we might very well find five different answers to, “How does it start?” and five different answers to, “What was the author intending to do in the piece?” and five different answers to most of the questions we ask of the texts. Over time we will want to read widely so that we can show our students a good range of

options for how to make all kinds of different texts work.

Sometimes we will want to take questions like those I have listed and research them very specifically in texts we admire to generate curriculum for a specific unit of study. Often we invite our students to do this with us in a mini-inquiry around some specific writing question. But much of our best curriculum will come to us when we least expect it. We’ll be just reading along, by the pool or in bed at night, and all of a sudden we’ll think, *Why, would you look at that. How cool . . . I’ll have to show this to*

my students. The things we notice like this, the striking features of well-written texts, will certainly help us answer these questions, but in our day-to-day reading we simply let the texts show us what they have to offer. We learn to trust that, with experience, our eyes will begin to see possibilities everywhere.

Thinking It Through...



If you’re reading in a study group and everyone looked at different texts with these questions in mind, you might spend some time talking about what you found. Look for connections and disconnections. Try naming some of your insights as general curriculum statements.

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