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Uncommonly Good Ideas: Teaching Writing in the Common Core Era

Murphy, Sandra; and Smith, Mary Ann
Teachers College Press, 2015

Book Review

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Invoking the name of the “Common Core” effort to establish national K-12 educational standards in its title, this is not a text directed primarily at college educators. It is important to ask, therefore, whether the authors’ approach is broad enough to answer the needs of the college classroom and whether their approach to teaching writing is of any use to the professor of theology or religious studies. The answer is “yes” to both.

In an effort to “mine the gold” in the Common Core writing standards, Murphy and Smith identify six big ideas: teaching writing as a process, integrating the language arts, extending the range of student writing, spiraling and scaffolding, and collaborating. The emphasis on writing as process informs their entire project and the other themes are treated in individual chapters. Preparation for the book included conversations with “dozens of teachers,” with some “college teachers in the mix” (7).

The second chapter provides a sample lesson plan and commentary designed to integrate the language arts; that is, reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Among the chapter’s helpful charts is a list of “strategies for writing with specifics” including “details,” “examples,” and “active verbs” (23). One can imagine a professor drawing from this list when helping a student enhance vague writing. Ideas for building student vocabularies and building community are equally transferable to the college environment. The third chapter takes on the challenge of extending the range of writing and acknowledges the difficulty students have when transitioning from descriptive to argumentative essays. With vignettes, ideas for writing exercises, and samples of student writing, the authors are able to provide some insight into the ways students struggle and how one might build bridges to help. In a particularly thoughtful

college-level example, the professor has her students read exemplar restaurant reviews and collaboratively design a grading rubric based on the effective strategies observed in these reviews before writing their own.

The fourth chapter examines how the pedagogical practices of spiraling and scaffolding produce better writers. By spiraling, the authors mean revisiting key concepts repeatedly at different layers of complexity. By scaffolding, they mean any temporary practice exercises or assistance intended to sharpen students' skills. Within a list of examples is the suggestion that students spend some class time focusing on a single quote that supports their argument and assessing how to connect it to their own ideas. Reflecting on collaboration, the fifth chapter describes student-to-student, teacher-to-student, and teacher-to-teacher collaborative strategies. Drawing on the theme of collegiality, the authors use their final chapter to consider how teachers can best produce positive institutional change. This is the principle of the book as a whole: effective teaching practices should be sought among effective teachers.

This slim volume will be of great interest to college educators. It provides meaningful insight into the struggles students experience when transitioning from high school to college writing and practical advice on how to help.

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