



Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing. Robert E. Brooke, ed. New York and Berkeley: Teachers College Press and National Writing Project, 2003. 204 pp.

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This small volume of chapters by teachers and their mentors is spectacular because it offers profound hope for the future. Teachers from rural Nebraska communities, supported by mentors from academia, designed and implemented writing programs that engaged students in learning about the families and communities around them. This project challenged assumptions about national and state educational standards by demonstrating that students can become active and engaged citizens and good writers by first examining and understanding the familiar and then gradually examining the forces that attach what is local and familiar to what is beyond. The ultimate result is the stimulation of a learning process that moves out from the center of their lives to gradually encompass a global world and all of its complexity. Teacher Phip Ross puts it this way,

The more I understand about myself and my immediate place, the more I understand the outside world and the better I can interpret it. We grow outward like a tree, increasing our growth rings from the tight center of "I," which has a home, a town, a state, a country, a planet. >From that center we reach out to understand the ever-expanding circle of experience. But first, we need to start in those places closest to our hearts. (p. 45)

Most important, the authors posit an education for responsible citizenship premised on the presumption that most people will live lives in places for which they must assume responsibility. Robert Brooke, the editor of this book and author of the introductory chapter argues for a curriculum devoted to inculcating a sense of the importance of place, fostering civic involvement, developing an understanding of how to live well economically, instilling a sense of spirituality, and creating a sense of belonging in a place.

The chapters written by teachers provide examples of how such a curriculum containing implicit values are articulated within a classroom and by individual students. Although this is not a "how to" manual, it does provide enough examples to convince the reader of the possibilities of the approach. I was struck by the quality of the student's writing. I concluded that the quality of student writing reflects their



enthusiasm for the subject matter, which is intensely personal. For instance, Rachel, a high school student from Syracuse wrote a list poem about the quilt shop located in the old bank building where she worked; it reads as follows:

tan, textured, tattered ceilings

warped, wounded, wooden floors

soft, soothing, subtle music

valuable, voided, vacant vault

secretly, silted, signature brick

old, overlooked orange crates

fabulous, fun, fragrant fabrics

This is a powerful collection of chapters about a powerful idea. Can we teach young people in such a way as to counter the disappearance of place in the face of powerful homogenizing forces? Can we teach people to care enough about where they are to assume responsibility for the place and its people? Can we teach people that happiness comes from belonging somewhere and to someone and that with belonging come obligations to the people with whom we share our place and to the place itself?

This book provides teachers with the framework for such a curriculum and surely suggests individuals who have experience with its implementation. The information on the specific organization of the Nebraska Project is confusing and might have been left out, except it explains the origin of the chapters. Although of extraordinary usefulness to teachers, I think that the ideas in this volume have a broader utility. Objections to implementation of "place-conscious education" are less likely to come from teachers than from those responsible for state and national standards, from boards of education, or from the general public, all whom may not accept the underlying values. I want to see the values implicit in these essays presented to the broadest possible audiences. Acceptance of these ideas will be the prerequisite for the implementation of this curriculum, the strengthening of our communities, and the reinforcement of their identities.

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