

Whose Goals? Whose Aspirations? Learning to Teach Underprepared Writers across the Curriculum. Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2002. 238 pp.

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Although the title of this book is apt, the book's scope is so broad that I could imagine two or three additional subtitles: "Negotiating Power Relations and Roles in the Classroom," or "Applying Dewey vs. Freire in a Multicultural Classroom," or "Examining the Social Aims of Education." If you are interested in any of the above, explored honestly, in a systematic and engaging manner, read on.

This is the third collaborative, book-length report of qualitative research in a philosopher's classes that Fishman (the philosopher) and McCarthy (a literacy researcher) have produced. Their experimental approach to dialogic reporting of their divergent assessments of the data provides an added layer of interest. In this report, we learn of the struggles of three students who find reading and writing in philosophy a major challenge to their existing literacy skills: (1) one woman, a math major and recent immigrant from India for whom English is a second language; (2) another woman, an African-American working mother majoring in criminal justice; and (3) an African-American man majoring in computer science. Early writing produced by each caused Fishman angst: sentence level errors and difficulties understanding essential points in the assigned texts were sufficiently egregious to warrant low grades, and pose a quandary about how to help these students improve their literacies in the context of a philosophy course.

In the first two cases, Fishman did no direct one-to-one intervention: other than giving feedback that the initial work was below a passing grade, Fishman applied the same strategies to these students as to the whole class. He practiced great respect for individual differences, a passion for helping students learn, and enactment of active and democratic (decentralized) classroom activities and homework assignments—all of which involved frequent and varied types of writing. With the third "case," which occurred after the first two, Fishman took an experimental approach to helping the student: a one-to-one tutorial, following the same principles enacted in the classroom, and adding two key elements: (1) an openness to learning what was causing the student's reading and writing problems—rather than assuming the causes; and (2) gentle coaching on strategies for reading and writing that could improve literacy.

The students made modest gains in their understanding of, and writing about,



philosophical texts during the semester, attributable, according to the researchers' analyses, to Fishman's use of multiple teaching strategies. To help decenter authority and promote student ownership of their learning, Fishman had them write letters to one other about difficult passages in the assigned texts, and discuss these letters in small groups. Students generated the exam questions, rather than the professor. Whole-group discussions were carefully managed so that the teacher's voice was not dominant. In two of the cases, peer-to-peer help and sense of commitment to one another helped to turn negative attitudes towards a required course into positive ones. More positive attitudes fostered a willingness to tackle and engage with the subject matter, which in turn led to increased ability to generate more appropriate content in writing assignments. There is an emotional "high" for researchers—and this reader—when one student reports, "I'm like Socrates. I do not claim what I do not know. I tell my daughter and my father about the conversations we have in here, and they want to know more. This class has made me stronger. My mind, my intelligence. I leave out of here big and strong and proud" (p. 93).

In the end, Fishman's advice for helping under-prepared writers in their courses sounds commonplace: "emphasize content over form, establish cooperative relationships with and among students, provide opportunities for students to bridge from familiar literacies to the target literacies, and expand what counts as academic progress" (pp. 180-182). In fact, reading the specific cases leads to a much fuller and more complex understanding of that advice.

I can imagine that different readers will read this text for different purposes. The authors dramatize and document an important message for all content-area and writing teachers, about which there should be no dispute: without a social climate of trust and honest engagement with subject matter, students will not invest very much effort in writing assignments. Without such engagement, no amount of instruction will benefit students. Literacy researchers can also learn much from the collaborative nature of the research: data were gathered that neither, solo, could have fully gleaned. Literacy scholars might only wish for more: more detailed analyses of literacy issues in written texts, and any specific interventions regarding rhetorical and syntactical problems. I doubt that all in composition studies and educational psychology would agree with McCarthy's advocacy of adapting curriculum and evaluation procedures for under-prepared students.

Writing teachers are not the only ones who should read this book: lawmakers should read these cases in the context of national and local debates on instituting universal educational standards. Education students would do well to use this report of research as a lively window into the enactment of Dewey's philosophies of education (as well as comparing them to the views of Freire and Gramsci). And though not the central purpose of the book, the demonstration of one teacher's ways of departing from a lecture format into a variety of active learning pedagogies—and their effects on students—is not to be missed by professors in all subject areas who are discouraged by student apathy or poor performance.



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