
BOOK REVIEWS

Wendy Bishop. *Teaching Lives: Essays and Stories*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1997. 346p.

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Wendy Bishop is a writing teacher — which is to say a composition scholar, researcher, and theorist — and a poet; she has been a writing program administrator. *Teaching Lives* is a collection of essays grouped around the various aspects of teaching writing: pieces included address the teaching of composition and first-year writing, the relationship of reading and writing in the writing classroom, teaching creative writing, writing program administration, and research methods in composition.

Taken together, the essays and stories offer a self-composed portrait of Bishop's teaching lives, what she calls "a retrospective learning experience" (ix). Within sections, essays are arranged more or less chronologically: in introductions to each section, Bishop provides a brief contextual framework for the thinking and questioning which prompted each piece, each investigation. The earliest pieces in the book date from the late 1980s, the most recent first appeared in 1994, and she has been busily writing since.

Bishop is well-published, and anyone who regularly reads composition journals is likely to be familiar with her work. What's different here is the opportunity to see the teaching lives that these stories and essays capture. The teaching of writing is ever a new conundrum for which this collection provides fresh perspectives, if not always magic keys. So *Teaching Lives* would be an especially useful text for training GTAs (which Bishop in fact does). Although nothing included is strictly a how-to piece, much practical teaching advice (and pedagogy) can be gleaned: how to trouble-shoot peer response groups, implement portfolio grading, design a syllabus for a nonfiction class, teach poetry, use readings in a writing classroom.

As a composition teacher, I think the collection has several strengths: it foregrounds the heuristic possibilities for writing instruction in crossing or blurring boundaries, emphasizes the importance of reflexive practice in the development and self-education of teachers, and consistently frames all aspects of writing in-

struction — teachers, students, departments, writing programs, and institutions — as politically situated.

Clearly Bishop's refusal to categorize and limit her thinking positions her to ask strategic questions: What exactly is the difference between composition and creative writing? Is all engaged writing creative in some way ("Crossing the Lines")? If traditional and expected ways of teaching grammar and revision aren't working, what might be better? Could insights from literary theory or creative writing exercises help ("Teaching 'Grammar for Writers'")? Reading *Teaching Lives*, I too want to take on multiple roles so I can ask better and more productive questions of my teaching.

In keeping with the collection's multiple perspectives, the writing employs several genres: "conventional" composition articles, poems, collages, literary nonfiction. As Bishop says, "If we accept the job description of writing teacher, then theory and practice, the public and personal, must form a web, a network, a circle, an interconnected chain, a dialog, a mutual refrain in our teaching, a tapestry, quilt or momentarily well-constructed whole" (320).

Stories and essays in the collection note the importance of reflective practice (as do Kathleen Blake Yancey, Pat Belanoff, Peter Elbow, and others). Bishop especially encourages keeping a teaching journal, a step which can often lead teachers toward undertaking qualitative research methods as they study their classrooms. Naturalistic methodologies are uniquely reflexive since they offer "a way to look at the researcher, who is often a teacher, as well as a way to look at those researched" (190). Looking back at what we have done in the classroom often leads us to further questions and more research: "In writing about our own teaching lives," Bishop writes, "we figure out our classrooms, we speak to others, and we compose ourselves in beneficial ways" (viii).

Richard Bullock, John Trimbur, and others have argued that writing instruction is deeply political. Naming herself a feminist and a "social expressivist" (employing Sherrie Gradin's term), Bishop locates herself politically from the start. Pieces in this collection often begin by examining a question's political context: the gender question in creative writing, the influence of literary theory on reading(s), and the feminized role of composition in English departments are all thoroughly explored. In sum, the writing classroom is never an inviolate tiny island — as adjuncts know all too well and new teachers may wish to remember.

This book provides an extended meditation on teaching — heads up, eyes open. It informs about English departments, especially composition's role(s) therein. And it affords pleasure to anyone interested in style, genre, and word play (what *can* one get away with in composition articles?). It's friendly, dialogic, honest, and

supportive of new teachers. Those who care about the teaching of writing — and teaching others to teach writing — should read it. ✱