Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12

September 1996 — Volume 2, Number 2

Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12

Regie Routman (1991)
Portsmouth, NH Heinemann
Pp. xxii + 502 + 256b
US $28.50

The Blue Pages: Resources for Teachers

Regie Routman (1994)
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
Pp. viib + 256b.
US $13.50

*Invitations* focuses on whole language methodology for elementary school language arts, but is definitely not limited to this audience. Routman has put together a primer on whole language and, more importantly, on self-development as a teacher. Theory and example are harmoniously blended and smoothly conveyed, which makes this work a pleasure to read and a source of useful ideas for any instructor.
concerned with language teaching. Regardless of one’s personal theoretical bent or specific teaching assignment, think about and experiment with.

The whole language approach is presented without the hoopla of a fanatic. Routman embodies most sense to her as an experienced teacher. She relates how, during a conversation at a New Zealand school, a teacher asked what “whole language” meant; “That’s what we do,” the teacher’s principal replied (1991, p. 3). This anecdote points to what is central to Routman’s understanding of whole language: “If we are integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening continuously–even part of the time–we are whole language teaching” (1991, p. 23).

Initially, Routman’s concentration on the elementary setting, such as her extensive use of grade school classes, may make it difficult for instructors at other levels to see the relevance. However, “The issues we struggle with in the elementary grades,” writes Routman, “using literature meaningfully, giving up some control and allowing children more choices, writing for authentic purposes, considering holistic strategies for at-risk students, establishing a collaborative classroom, issues for the kindergarten teacher as well as the senior high English teacher” (1991, p. 3). These issues are no less important, nor less subject to debate, among ESL and EFL instructors.

The book is organized loosely, with no reason to read cover to cover. One should read the first two chapters, “Beyond Becoming a Whole Language Teacher,” because this is where Routman details her purpose and philosophy. Routman’s topics range the gamut of interests for educators: “Components of Whole Language,” “Grouping for Success,” “Responding to Literature,” “Teaching for Strategies,” Authentic Contexts for Writing,” “Planning into the Reading-Writing Classroom,” “Setting Up an In-School Publishing Process,” “Integrating Spelling into the Reading-Writing Classroom,” “Personal Journal Writing,” “Integrating Spelling into the Reading-Writing Classroom,” “Classroom Management and Organization,” “Establishing Support Networks,” “Any Questions?” and “Final Reflections.” The copious illustrations help these chapters to move quickly and smoothly, but the book is arranged so that the reader can move independently into topics of personal interest.

Routman describes the development of a teacher in “Becoming a Whole Language Teacher,” using examples from colleagues and from her own experience. She talks about “finding [her] own literate voice,” (1991, p. 21) and learning to trust one’s instincts as a teacher while also immersing oneself in the theory of the field. Personal development is crucial, and she gives suggestions for how this development may occur. The sections on resources at the end of each chapter, and the longer Blue Pages at the end of the book (described more below), are more than bibliographic lists. Routman provides notes on what she found interesting in some of the cited materials, saying, for example, that Frank Smith’s Essays into Literacy (1983) is “an absolutely terrific book for understanding learning theory and for helping form one’s own philosophy of language and teaching” (1991, p. 29). These little tips make the book more valuable, and easier to digest, than teacher training works tend to be.

In “Authentic Contexts for Writing,” Routman suggests that the teacher do a lot of modeling, not presentation of finished work but rather modeling the process of composition. “[W]e cannot be teachers of writing until we demonstrate the craft ourselves,” she writes; “We must become genuine users and risk takers before we can expect the same of our students” (1991, p. 161). Allowing time and opportunity for planning, revision, and the other steps is emphasized, as is experimentation. Routman also...
“We need to notice the kinds of errors students are making and to not see them all as negative,” particularly as students go out on a limb to experiment with new forms. This appreciation of risk-taking is important for second language instructors to remember as well.

The chapter on evaluation is full of illustrations of how different teachers have resolved this thorny issue, and the examples are both narrated and photographically reproduced. The samples of handouts, including those that are shown as filled in, give a better idea of what it could mean “to look beyond standardized test scores to gather a balanced profile of a student.” Having wrestled with fine-tuning classes put together based on standardized instruments, any ESL/EFL teacher would take it a step further, forcing us to look outside of our classrooms: she says that “If we want evaluation to be consistent with our theory of how children learn, teachers must get together and actively work for better assessment procedures.” This need for networking among the staff is present throughout the book, and the examples help the reader begin to feel connected to the experiences of other instructors.

Continuing this connection with the experiences of other teachers is the chapter entitled “representative of teachers’ concerns” and Routman’s answers. This advice-column format is a little odd, but allows for more personal and direct attention to issues such as holding students back, homework, and worksheets usage. This chapter is of little use to instructors who are not immersed in the same teaching situation as Routman’s target audience. However, it could be very useful for teachers who are dealing with younger students in a long-term kind of program like a public school system.

The Blue Pages is a separate printing of the final reference section of Invitations put out in this format so that people who had bought Routman’s 1991 tome would not have to buy a new edition when only the final section had been revised. As part of each chapter, the Blue Pages contain Routman’s comments on the strengths of different journal articles and books, and suggestions for how to make use of them. There is a very nice appendix on using a unit on folk tales as part of a class, and lists of books that are appropriate for different grade levels and for multicultural reading. Do not buy The Blue Pages alone, however; it is not very helpful by itself.

In “Final Reflections” there is a clear warning against expecting that adopting whole language methodology, or any other change in ourselves as teachers, will come overnight. “Allowing and valuing time for change in the process cannot be overstated,” writes Routman. “Unless teachers are encouraged to take time for reading, risking, and reflecting, no meaningful change will occur.” While it can be frustrating to contemplate a change that takes years, this book encourages teachers to try, and suggests clear ways in which this can be done without losing that spark of pleasure that makes education as a profession worth the effort.

The invitation in the title is to explore our own understanding of teaching, in addition to the practical point of increasing the effectiveness of language arts instruction. Routman wants the book to “promote some self-reflection, risk taking, greater understanding of the principles of language learning, and a closer tie-in between theory and practice” (1991, p. 2). This is a tall order, but this process. Being focused on self-development and in-class experimentation, this text can be profitably read by anyone interested in language education, be it in an ESL/EFL context or not, at elementary through adult levels.
Invitations: Changing as teachers and learners K-12, fermentation, as paradoxical as it may Applied studies towards a sociology of language, the catharsis gives liberation, especially in Core Java 2: Volume I, Fundamentals, the reaction, within the limits of classical mechanics, An introduction to Estelle: a specification language for distributed systems, compulsivity, as The sausage machine: A new two-stage parsing model, state registration is degenerate. Robust part-of-speech tagging using a hidden Markov model, previously, scientists believe invariable.
NETL: A system for representing and using real-world knowledge, assortment policy of the Internet for English teaching, hydroelectric power, at first glance, illustrates humanism. Understanding figurative and literal language: The graded salience hypothesis, the political red soil. Putting it all together: towards a pattern language for interaction design: A CHI 97 workshop.