

Book Review

Deborah Dean. *What Works in Writing Instruction: Research and Practices*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2010. 217 pp.

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I'll be honest, reading this book felt like vindication to me; I am, apparently, already doing "what works" in my own writing instruction. It is nice, however, to have it articulated, annotated, and supported in a book published by the NCTE. This isn't to say that there isn't anything to learn from Deborah Dean's accessible and excellent book. In fact, I believe that all teachers in any subject who require that their students write should read this book to better understand the process that goes into good writing (and good writing instruction).

Deborah Dean is a former secondary English teacher who is now director of the Central Utah Writing Project. For this book, Dean looked at the landmark 2007 report *Writing Next*. What *Writing Next* did was perform a "large-scale statistical review of research" in order to identify research-proven effective writing instruction elements. Dean takes these findings and provides "an explanation of the elements reported in *Writing Next*" providing "an overview of [each] elements, with some explanation of the history and ideas behind it" (NEED PAGE NUMBER). Dean devotes one chapter for each of the eleven elements identified by the *Writing Next* report. Each chapter is backed up with extensive research, as well as suggested exercises and a brief, but useful, annotated bibliography. She concludes the book with a chapter on "Putting Everything Together," an appropriate and meaningful ending to a highly informative

book. The elements outlined are: Writing Strategies, Summarization, Collaborative Writing, Specific Product Goals, Word Processing, Sentence Combining, Prewriting, Inquiry Activity, Process Writing Approach, Study of Models, and Writing for Content Learning. I have listed them here in the order that they appear in the book, but Dean admits in the introduction that the book “might be read in any order” (NEED PAGE NUMBER).

I am a university writing instructor. Like so many of us, I am off the tenure-track and my background is not in rhetoric and composition but instead in literature. I learned on the job, so to speak, figuring out largely for myself (with the help of some excellent mentors) what worked and what didn't work when teaching writing, particularly for teaching developmental writers. I also mentor high school English teachers in our area (rural eastern Kentucky). One of the things that I have noticed is that they often do not have much training in the teaching of writing. I am going to strongly recommend that they pick up this book to help them more clearly articulate and plan how to help their students become better writers. What I find most useful about this book is that it can be used to teach any level of writing, from beginners to college-level writers. Dean opens her book with a description of watching her four-year-old granddaughter “write a book” and notes that even at this young age, she is engaging unconsciously in a process and using strategies that we all go through when trying to write.

Personally, I was most drawn to the chapter on Collaborative Writing; peer-review and collaborative assignments (more pejoratively referred to as “group work”) are important not just for students' learning and writing process, but also an important skill they will need for the work force. Unless a student is working alone in her own business with only herself as the sole

employee, collaborative work will be a part of any student's professional life after college. But, as Dean points out from the beginning, in practice, collaborative writing is often fraught with interpersonal conflicts, disengaged or unconfident students, and typically leads to mixed results.

So, how do we get students to really “help each other with one or more aspects of their writing,” as put in the *Writing Next* report (NEED PAGE NUMBER)? Preparation and structure are important, but so is adjusting your own expectations as an instructor. And, of course, purposefulness. I think many times we forget as teachers to clearly articulate to students what the purpose of any exercise (collaborative or otherwise) is, which can lead to poor (or at least misguided) results. Reflecting that the book is writing for a new generation of students and teachers, Dean suggests using wikis and/or Google Docs to move collaboration online (and, one could say, make it “trendier” by calling it crowdsourcing, although Dean doesn't go that far). Again, it is one of the strengths of the book that Dean finds ways to integrate new technologies with tried-and-true writing strategies.

Technology and writing has become an important issue, especially for students who may not have consistent access to computers or the internet. This book is useful because it adapts exercises for both low-tech and high-tech environments. If I had one criticism of the book it would be that it does not go far enough in suggesting uses for technology, such as blogs or mobile phones (which are increasingly mini-computers). While Dean mentions both blogs and podcasts, the only use for blogs that she suggests is for letter-to-the-editor type writing. There is still much work to be done to expand on what Dean starts here, helping teachers integrate technology into their classroom, with the strategies Dean outlines always in mind.

Deborah Dean does not reinvent the wheel with this book, thankfully, and what she does provide is a reader-friendly, teacher-friendly guide to help students become better writers. Her examples are drawn from her own experience and are familiar to anyone who has ever taught writing. She writing style is colloquial and engaging; most jargon is avoided or thoroughly explained. Given the pressure teachers are under these days to justify their pedagogy, this book also allows teachers to clearly articulate their own strategies and offers a quick reference to studies and research to back up their practices. This is a book for teachers by a teacher, and I could not recommend it more strongly.