

Foreword

Slogging through stacks of papers, camping out in trailers that are planted on what used to be the soccer field, trudging through file cabinets looking for that important handout that has now magically disappeared, stamping out every single misplaced comma or misspelled word—these well-worn pathways to teaching are often the ones that cause us to burn out. If you are like me, you are always looking for new, exciting adventures, new terrain to investigate, new roads to travel, new avenues that will make our classrooms, once again, come alive with learning. Cindy Urbanski's volume is our guide to this exciting adventure. This book offers new ways of engaging with writing and literature. She asks that we become coaches, modeling our reading and writing strategies for our students so that they can see, firsthand, how we think about literature or compose an essay.

Coaches. When Cindy asked me to read an early version of this book, I tried to persuade her to ditch the “coaching” metaphor. My associations with coaches (that is, before Cindy) had not been all positive. Now I don't speak about coaches in a vacuum. I don't tell many people this, but I had a state championship team in Class B girls' basketball when I taught high school in Texas. I don't tell many people, because I may be the only winning coach in the entire state of Texas who didn't become a principal. And so my association with coaches—the ones who were given the history classes, who were the disciplinarians, and later became the principals—did not, on the surface, seem to speak to the teacher I wanted to be. But Cindy's gifts as a writer and teacher convinced me otherwise. She saw from her experience a different world, where modeling and showing—not telling and then saying it again louder—was the image for teaching writing and literature

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that we teachers could enact. She could see in her own experience as a runner and a cross-country coach and as a writer and as a teacher of writing how those worlds come together and make the classroom a vibrant and productive place.

Coaching. If you are wondering, “How am I supposed to model and show students my writing and reading?” “Am I supposed to expose all my false starts at writing—all my dead ends?” don’t worry. This volume reminds us that even teachers struggle with their reading and writing. By showing our students the work behind the finished product, we demystify how reading and writing can mutually enrich our understanding of what we read and our engagement with what we write. It will give you courage to work along with your students, to build your classroom as a writing and reading workshop.

Coaching. As a “coach,” I can speak to my students about how a book touched me in personal and profound ways. As a reader, I can show students how I make personal connections to literature or connect my responses to literature to the world at large. Take, for example, this short piece I wrote for my class after reading Cindy’s book:

On the 24-hour flight to Taipei, after watching all four cross-Pacific movies, I pulled a novel from my bag. Anita had given me this book and inscribed in its cover, “To Lil, for growing up in the South.” I had this book for over a year. *The Secret Lives of Bees* began to melt the remaining hours in my hands, taking me home to a life I had known, but never lived, a life far removed from mine, to a girl who needed to know her mother, her mother’s love left to her in secrets that she could never fully unravel. At 2 a.m. somewhere over the Taiwan Straits, where missiles perch on tanks awaiting Chinese children’s cries for independence, for freedom, for easing of the iron hand, for the space that an island carves from a cold enveloping sea, I saw that I, too, longed to know: Had I in my struggles to teach, cloaked my subject in secrets, found my space, and left the child to cry alone on the dusty road?

My personal connection between the plight of Lily in the novel as she worked through the tragic loss of her mother and the plight

of Taiwanese and mainland Chinese children who, in their own ways, struggle for freedom and for their motherland, demonstrates to my students how my reading of a novel portraying life in South Carolina in 1964 could resonate in my imagination to world struggles in 2005. As a writer, I could show my students how repetition propels my meaning forward. I could even show them several endings to the paragraph that I drafted before I arrived at this one, the final one, for now.

Cindy's imaginative energy and creativity for teaching reading, writing, thinking, and literature (with both a little *I* and a big *L*) show us ways of connecting with our students while still helping them tackle the end-of-the-year test without leaving any child on the dusty road.

I must admit that my not unusual failure to connect to all of my students is featured within these pages. I remember well the class Cindy talks about—a class full of teachers who were struggling to do well by their students and who were searching for ways to engage their students and still manage to have them well prepared for the writing test at the end of the school year. I gave them theory, when they needed to have a way to bring theory and practice together. When I talked about practice, they thought I had no idea about the classroom world they inhabited. They were being left in the dust, and I felt like a card-carrying member of the “research establishment”—*those people* who were asking questions about stuff that no teacher even cared about, things like, “What was the spelling variability in the flash condition?”

Cindy saw beyond my shortcomings and found what she needed in her journey to create in all of her students a love for reading and writing. This volume documents her journey to integrate the teaching of literature with best practices in the teaching of writing. It tells her teaching story of working with rural kids in North Carolina and with inner-city students in the Charlotte/Mecklenburg schools. It is a powerful teacher narrative based on classroom research and reflection that documents not only what she does in the classroom but how and why she engages her students in the ways she describes here.

This book, clearly the work of a master teacher, shows those of us who struggle to get our acts together in the classroom, to integrate the teaching of reading, writing, literature, even grammar, by showing students that they are thinkers and knowers and

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storytellers. Cindy models for us in the same way she models for her students, letting us see her and her students at work, showing us how she arrives at her beliefs and values, and demonstrating her thinking and learning processes as a writer, reader, runner, and teacher.

I am excited that we teachers now have this book as a guide, because in reading it we embark on a very interesting and exciting journey. We are taken into classrooms and shown how to transform our own practices in ways that we might not have before imagined. Cindy's book surely gives me the courage to teach in new ways and to begin again in ways that will enable each student to embark on the journey with me. In other words, this book puts Cindy Urbanski's teaching on the map.

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