

# Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

---

## **Literary Conversations in the Classroom: Deepening Understanding of Non-fiction and Narrative**

by Diane Barone and Rebecca Barone

New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2017, 146 pages

ISBN: 978-0-8077-5733-8 (paperback)

### **Reviewed by / Revu par**

Christina Belcher

Redeemer University College

At a time when authors such as Mark Harris (2014) warn society about the loss of an ability to “attend” or pay attention in the constant interruptions of a digital age, and Sherry Turkle (2016) cautions readers to reclaim the art of conversation, the book *Literary Conversations in the Classroom: Deepening Understanding of Non-fiction and Narrative* provides a timely arena of thought on a significant topic. Part of the fine art of literary education must entail teaching students at all grade levels to talk to and from as well as about the texts they read.

Authors Diane and Rebecca Barone are concerned that conversations about text tend to involve what they term as “parallel play” more than deep thinking. Rather than only conversing to a literature circle role as an individual task for their thoughts, students need to be able to scribe responses in a written and illustrated form that assists them to craft deeper conversations across a broader field of knowledge. Students need to engage a

sense of wonder about what they read, and be able to articulate this well. The authors outline particular instructional guidelines to meet such goals, while also meeting educational standards for literacy.

Chapter 1 contrasts the ideas of parallel sharing and sophisticated literary conversations. This chapter examines the nuances between students who rely on reading narrative with those who read narrative for a deeper intent of seeking out thematic concepts, genres, etc., and in doing so, appropriate academic standards for literary acquisition. The authors express how writing and drawing serve as the foundation for literary conversations in the complex act of meaning making. It is evident that meaningful literary conversations require reflection that includes lengthy conversations over time during which students can inquire, think, draw, and write as they come to significant understandings about what they read. The authors model examples to teach students to explicitly respond to text, providing a lens for students who struggle with literary capability. Heterogeneous grouping, touted to be superior to ability grouping, is well explained as assisting those less enamored with reading or text. The authors support the view that visual learning must be intentional in showing students how to engage all of the language arts (listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing). They also consider the aspects of appropriate challenge, of designing learning situations well, and of instilling confidence and high expectations while supporting students to engage goals (Hattie, 2012). A wide variety of suggested websites for teacher and student reference are included.

Chapters 2 to 4 describe how to begin literary groupings, how to set expectations, and how to include the role of the teacher and student in the process. These chapters are full of examples for teachers to use in implementing the literature circle roles of Daniels (2002), and include both resources and examples of how to use specific literary texts.

Chapters 5 to 6 target discussion and text-based multimodal responses to literacy, and how to implement the shift from fiction to non-fiction and informational texts with many examples and photos of student work. This book concludes with a seventh chapter on assessment within the instructional model proposed.

My point of critique with this book is that it appears to place boxes of separation between knowledge, education, and age. Education is an interesting field, in which those in high school grumble about elementary schools' failure to equip students for high school while those in university grumble about high schools' failure to equip students

for university. This would be warranted if education only existed to be a knowledge and benchmark economy consisting of separate institutional silos. However, education exists to assist a civil person to live a life, and herein, new information can be beneficial to any age where there is a need or knowledge gap. The longer the silos exist around possible ability, the longer society will see education as a boxed event, rather than a life-giving one. I am always bemused to observe that more adults read picture books than they do educational journals. Education is a relational enterprise. Silos actually define schooling, not education. Seeing education as a search for wisdom and equipping for life that may not be defined neatly by age or grade, is more helpful to meaning making and authenticity.

Although this book was written with the pre-university context in mind, it is not unusual to find university-level work that champions multimodal learning in higher education. Journal articles crossing elementary/high school/university boundaries have been apparent in classrooms for over two decades. The New London Group (1996), Walsh (2010) and Loerts and Belcher (2015) also confirm the significance of practice in multimodal learning for literary acquisition across elementary and post-secondary audiences. The ideas and practices are not new.

Barone & Barone assist readers in moving the pragmatics of education forward by providing new ways of thinking about literary instruction within other pedagogical designs. Educators returning to the original purpose of education as a search for wisdom, regardless of age, may broaden and expand horizons for the future. As Wordsworth noted in his poem *The Rainbow*, “the child is the father of the man.” To this end, we must take heed of what children are learning and not learning, to what ends and for what reasons. This text could assist in that process.

### *References*

- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups* (2nd ed.). Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers Limited.
- Harris, M. (2014). *The end of absence: Reclaiming what we've lost in a world of constant connection*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishing.

- Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Loerts, T., & Belcher, C. (2015). Engaging multiliteracies learning. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal (LICEJ)*, 6(4), 2094-2102.
- New London Group (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60-92.
- Turkle, S. (2016). *Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Walsh, M. (2010). Multimodal literacy: What does it mean for classroom practice? *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 211-239.