

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Building Adolescent Literacy in Today's English Classrooms**

Author: Randy Bomer

Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH: 2011

Paperback, 334 pages; ISBN-13: 978-0-325-01394-7, ISBN-10: 0-325-01394-2

By Absorn Meesing\*

#### **Overview**

Since Thailand's entry into the ASEAN Economic Community ( or A.E.C.) last December, the need to upgrade English requirements at all levels of Thai education has become more acute. In such a demanding atmosphere, the English teachers, school administrators, and even policy makers need to come up with cutting-edge, 21<sup>st</sup> century resources on restructuring and strengthening pedagogical practices. Randy Bomer's *Building Adolescent Literacy in Today's English Classrooms* is one such resource that should be near the top of any educator's reading list. While this book is not a quick-fix remedy or a new lesson-plan recipe, it does provide practical advice and, more importantly, a thoughtful philosophical framework for teaching English in today's tech-infused and distraction-filled classroom environments.

With his 25 years of experience working as a teacher, staff developer, and consultant, Bomer is a leader in English teaching. Randy Bomer has been president of the National Council of Teachers of English, co-director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University, director of the National Writing Project website, and a consultant at schools across America. For ten years, Bomer worked with Lucy Calkins at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Calkins, the author of globally well-known books *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1983) and *The Art of Teaching Reading* (2001) gave Randy the following acknowledgement, "...Randy Bomer, now a professor at Indiana University's School of Education, was co-director of the Project when we began this work and many of its bravest aspects can be attributed to the seminal thinking Randy and I did together at the very start...".

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## Review

Randy Bomer divides his book into four sections:

1. Fixing Attention: The Spotlight In the Classroom
2. Reading Outside the Skin: Making Thinking Visible
3. People Who Make Things: Teaching Writing as the Design of Meaning and Relationship
4. Extensions and Contractions: Curriculum in Today's English Classroom

### Section 1 – Fixing Attention: The Spotlight in the Classroom

Keeping students' attention in English class has always been a challenge, but it is arguably even more of a challenge today because students have access to myriad of digital media unavailable a generation or even a decade ago. By "fixing attention," Bomer refers to harnessing the intrinsic or spontaneous attention adolescents employ when doing activities such as listening to their MP3 players, reading award winning novels, or writing blog entries about their personal lives. For example, Bomer connected with one often reluctant student by showing him how he was already employing literacy skills by using the internet to get information about rebuilding a motorcycle. He also tapped into student social media use and online gaming habits as platforms to discuss and share the literacy skills that they use outside of the classroom. Bomer therefore "meets" the students instead of just proclaiming knowledge. Knowing what adolescents do outside is necessary to keep their attention inside the classroom.

Getting their attention, however, is only the first step as brief moments (however frequent) of fixed attention obviously do not constitute the sustained learning needed to attain real academic and professional success. To encourage sustained learning, Bomer discusses four types of social arrangements used in language classes: independent work, partnership work, small group work, and whole class instruction. He states that while English classes need a combination of these four arrangements, the workshop arrangement has key advantages and is his preferred approach (p.14). For one thing, workshops allow students to choose projects and "Students are most motivated when they have the most choice" (p.80). Students tend to take ownership for these projects and, just like in a wood shop, they know exactly where their projects are and can pick up on them where they left off during the previous class.

Bomer further argues that both gaining attention and encouraging sustained learning are facilitated when the teacher respects the students. This belief is part of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model drawn from organizational management, which is different from the more traditional deficit perspectives (pp.22, 25). In the AI model, teachers need to believe that all students have something to share. There is no such thing as a student with a "deficit of knowledge." The teacher should try to elicit what the students know and can contribute. When adolescents realize that their teacher respects them as contributors, they tend to pay full attention in class. Setting up an environment where knowledge comes from the bottom-up as opposed to top-down is essential for having successful English classes.

## **Section 2– Reading Outside the Skin: Making Thinking Visible**

In this section, Bomers discusses how to help adolescents become active, willing, and interested readers. He begins with the premise ‘reading is thinking’ and describes a range of mental actions readers undertake while reading: envisioning, listening, expecting, monitoring, activating knowledge, and creating relationships with characters (p.91). Listening as a reader means attending to the voice of a text and learning to listen for shifts in the voice; being able to detect such shifts is important for developing real reading enjoyment and comprehension. In addition, activities that help readers think about the work include calling other texts to mind, remembering autobiographical experiences, asking questions, or thinking about structure of the texts while reading, interpreting texts (developing hunches about the text and following them), and critiquing. A useful chart of thinking devices discussed in the chapter is also provided (p.129). This chapter also features other forms, charts, and diagrams. Some of the most interesting strategies in the book are stated in the “Minilessons for Opening Conversation” section. Bomer discusses how to start a conversation at the very beginning—moving from silence to talk, from no content to shared content (pp.142-146). In this reading section, Bomer gives clear examples of how to deal effectively with reluctant learners through one-on-one conversations and how to help them discover the literacy processes that they may not have realized they had. Studying his way, students will eventually see reading as something essential to their lives and something they like and choose for themselves. Students should

learn to enjoy reading in class, outside of the class, on vacation or while travelling, and so on.

## **Section 3 – People Who Make Things: Teaching Writing as the Design of Meaning and Relationship**

Writing is another key part of literacy. Bomer’s position, contrary to what some teachers practice, is that all not all reading experiences need to be followed by writing. As he puts it, “we should not build English classes where every reading event has to be commodified into a product for grading. This makes many people hate reading...” Bomer states that in his own literate life, he almost never writes in response to novels or poetry, although he reads them all the time. Instead, he keeps a notebook and writes down when ideas pop into his mind, which may lead to other things that he can write about later. Bomer fully supports the idea of writing for thinking. Several strategies are given to support this idea of “writing-to-think,” such as, writing to support thoughtful reading (p.156), writing to prepare for discussion, writing to think through what you have to say, writing to plan points for discussion, writing to discuss and argue, writing for an audience, etc.

Just as he does with reading, Bomer advocates promoting an intellectual life for all learners and this should be a goal of teaching writing. He encourages students to focus on two things while writing: 1) the real audience (not the teacher); and 2) what they want to say. English teaching should not only involve writing in response to another author’s text. Indeed, when teaching writing the focus should be on asking students to pay attention

to their own thinking. "...to notice when they have a thought, when they begin making an idea..." (p.167).

Besides these broad notions, the book is full of in-page, separately boxed texts with helpful tips, practical ideas, and strategies that can be adapted or applied to different classrooms. These texts include: "Multilingual Notes," "Technology Notes," "Writing to Support the Experience of Reading," and "Minilessons" on various topics.

One Multilingual Note states "Many students who come to English later in life may always write with an accent, and there is no reason to look down on people who write with an accent... Though it's important to make them aware of the patterns in their writing... it's equally important not to so fixate on those patterns that it's all we ever talk about... We need to make sure they are gaining access to other important things to learn about writing" (p. 217). In other words, do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good by emphasizing grammar to the point that it turns potentially proficient students away from the whole process.

A good example of a "Technology Note" is "...I do not subscribe to the view that young people are digital 'natives' and older ones are digital 'immigrants' (Prensky 2001)... They may know how to operate devices... but they still need plenty of support to become thoughtful, critical, and powerful readers and writers in cyberspace" (p.31). The devices students use today allow them access to virtually limitless information, but that access is wasted unless they know how to navigate and interpret that information.

#### **Section 4 - Extensions and Contractions: Curriculum in Today's English Classroom**

In the last section of the book, Bomer gives three suggestions for teachers: aim at active and effective participation in digital culture; make more of grammar by studying languages as linguists do; and work toward tests without insulting student intelligence. Teachers may think that giving a test is providing prompts and ask students to write to assigned topics in constrained segments of time. This kind of thinking is unnecessarily narrow and it weakens students. Instead, students should learn real things in the curriculum and the writing skills they develop will help them doing the test. The section ends with practical ideas for yearly unit planning with samples of unit plans and each having their own goal (appendix, p.311-314). Also in this section, the new NCTE definition of literacy is stated (p.243).

#### **Conclusion**

This book may serve as a practical tool, but more importantly, it is a conceptual handbook for teaching English to today's adolescents. Drawn from rich experience and research, it is a powerful resource for teachers who wish to bring real "student centered" education to their classrooms. The author clearly shows how to assess adolescent literacy needs and how to nurture all learners, native speakers, EFL (English as a foreign language), EAL (English as an additional language) or ESL (English as a second language) students alike. The author's experience is largely based on teaching in multicultural and traditionally underserved communities in New York (USA), where he

dealt with many of the same issues that exist in Thailand's ESL classrooms. It would thus be interesting to see the ideas in this book applied to English classrooms in Thailand, where teachers are under pressure to bring the nation's youth up to the standard in English language proficiency that the ASEAN integration now demands.