

**Harris, Joseph, John D. Miles, and Charles Paine, eds.**  
*Teaching with Student Texts: Essays Toward an  
Informal Practice.* Logan: Utah State UP, 2010. Print.

Reviewed by Lulu C. H. Sun

As the editors write in the Acknowledgments, this collection of essays began with a problem they faced as mentors of new writing teachers: how could they help them use student texts in the writing classroom? But the book evolved into something much larger, a book they hope will inform the practice of any teacher who uses student's own texts for instructional purposes.

The editors began the project out of a desire “to show how experienced teachers work with student texts in the writing classroom and why that practice can be so transformative” (1). It is a project that would show “how teachers can use texts written by the students they are working with to illustrate the moves, strategies, principles, and forms of critical reading and academic writing” (1). Their goal is “to document a *range* of teaching moves and practices that provide both generative examples and specific activities that others can adopt and adapt” (2). To this end, the book succeeds as it covers a range of pedagogies from workshop activities and techniques to classroom discussions of student drafts.

However, as the three editors acknowledge, “the essays in this book do not form a unified whole” (2). The book offers varied approaches to teaching with student texts: “Sometimes these approaches align, sometimes they diverge, sometimes they conflict” (3). More importantly, the book offers different levels—from how to structure and run a writing workshop, how to structure and run a writing seminar, the connection between the writer and his/her text, ways of working with students texts, the multimodal writing course, to co-authoring—and would be more useful for beginning teachers versus veteran ones. The editors make a critical distinction between *texts* and *writing* and advocate a pedagogy that puts students at the center of a writing course by

making the texts they produce the materials for that course. The book, hence, coheres around an interest not simply in students writing, but in student writings as a teaching focus. This leads to interesting questions about the texts we writing instructors use for a writing course. Should they all consist of student texts? Or professional texts? Or some kind of combination of the two?

There are twenty-one essays in the collection and almost all the essays are under 4,000 words. The book is divided into three sections—"Valuing Student Texts" (four essays), "Circulating Student Texts" (seven essays), and "Changing Classroom Practices" (ten essays).

The first section, "Valuing Student Texts," consists of essays that discuss the uses and meanings of student texts. I personally found the first essay in the section by Bruce Horner most provocative. Horner's "Re-Valuing Student Writing" identifies the most significant reason for teaching using students texts: "placing student texts in the center of a class makes student writing matter by making the issue of student writing—and writing generally—a legitimate area of academic inquiry" (7).

Horner identifies three trajectories or assumptions regarding student writing—"the problem of student writing with either the students' selves, the academic conventions to which their writing is expected to conform, or the location of the students and their writing in the first-year writing course" (10). In this sense, students' writing is "a display," "a performance for evaluation," and is what Horner calls "notwriting" (11). The essay explores ways of treating student writing in the first-year writing course as "legitimate academic work" (10). For example, Horner suggests that teachers can move students and their writing outside the location of first-year composition, change the kind of writing students are asked to engage in "from more academically conventional forms to those with recognizable currency in the public sphere," incorporate into individual assignments occasions for students to respond dialogically to the contributions of other students, and treat textbook chapters, teachers' written comments, and assignments as subject to questioning (16, 22).

Through these strategies, teachers can acknowledge “the students’ engagement in the reworking of knowledge” and can explore, with their students, the “academic use of student writing” (22, 23). Basically, Horner argues that student writing can move beyond “exchange value” (“notwriting”) to “use value” (contribution to and reworking of academic knowledge).

The other three essays in the first section provide methods for students and teachers to explore the ways student writing can be valued in various situations and by various readers. Nicole B. Wallack, in “Revealing Our Values: Reading Student Texts with Colleagues in High School and College,” examines how we can work productively in collaborative workshops to read student writing across educational levels. Chris M. Anson, Matthew Davis, and Domenica Vilhotti, in “‘What Do *We* Want in This Paper?’: Generating Criteria Collectively,” describe a method they designed to help students articulate and internalize readers’ expectations for their assigned writing. In his “Teaching the Rhetoric of Writing Assessment,” Asao B. Inoue questions conventional technologies of writing assessment and argues that students themselves need to engage in and reflect on the rhetoric of assessment.

In the second section, “Circulating Student Texts,” Paul Anderson and Heidi McKee, in “Ethics, Student Writers, and the Use of Student Texts to Teach,” address the ethical questions that arise when teachers teach with student texts, and offer suggestions on how to ethically and responsibly circulate these texts in the classroom. In the authors’ view, “all uses of student texts in teaching—regardless of the medium and mode of the texts and regardless of the teaching contexts—involve the same ethical concern: the impact on the student writer as a *person*. Thus, we focus not on the ethical *use* of the texts but on the ethical *treatment* of the students who wrote the texts” (62-63).

Anderson and McKee state four guiding principles: students should control what they disclose about themselves and to whom, should control the circulation and distribution of what they create, should be respected and protected from harm, and should

experience the best learning environments their instructors are able to provide. The authors then apply the guiding principles to six key questions: Should permission be obtained from student writers to share their texts? What do students need to know when asked for permission for the use of their texts? What should teachers do to facilitate the presentation and reception of a student's text? What about the third parties students represent in their papers? Can ethical problems be avoided by using pseudonyms and removing or changing personal information, and should there be exceptions? This essay is particularly helpful for new teachers who might not be aware of the complex ethical issues involved in using student texts.

Other chapters in the section explore different ways to circulate student texts in the writing classroom, outside of the writing classroom, on the campus, and beyond the campus. In "Reframing Student Writing in Writing Studies Composition Classes," Patrick Bruch and Thomas Reynolds seek to help readers think about the ways student writing can play a central role in writing classes that are consistent with current composition theory and that also prioritize improved student writing. Laurie McMillan's "Students Write to Students about Writing" focuses on one strategy for creating student conversations about composition across classrooms. In her first-year composition course, she asks students to communicate to other students what they have learned in the class, thus positioning these student writers as experts. In his "The Low-Stakes, Risk-Friendly Message-Board Text," Scott Warnock examines using one digital learning tool—message boards—to help teachers reconceive how students create and disseminate texts in the teachers' courses. In "Product as Process: Teaching Publication to Students," Karen McDonnell and Kevin Jefferson discuss a course dedicated to producing *e-Vision*, their university's first-year writing journal, and the development of a coherent practice for teaching publication to students. An essay by Doug Downs, Heidi Estrem, and Susan Thomas, "Students' Texts beyond the Classroom: *Young Scholars in Writing's* Challenges to College Writing Instruction," discusses the pedagogical

implications of using published student texts in the classroom. And an essay by Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue, “The Figure of the Student in Composition Textbooks,” examines the ways in which students and their writings are represented and positioned in composition textbooks and the pedagogical, theoretical, and ethical implications of such practices.

In the third and final section, “Changing Classroom Practices,” the first few essays describe strategies for working with student texts. In “Workshop and Seminar,” Joseph Harris distinguishes between two classroom formats—workshop and seminar. In a workshop, students offer each other advice on revising their work in progress. In a seminar, a teacher leads a discussion of a student text to pose questions about writing for the entire class. As Harris writes, “The workshop treats students seriously as writers. Its purpose, after all, is to help them revise and improve their writing. . . . In a seminar, a teacher leads a conversation about a text written by one of the students in the room. . . . The question that drives a workshop is ‘*How can we help this writer revise?*’ The question that drives a seminar is ‘*what can we learn as writers from this text?*’” (146, 147). The focus of the workshop is on the writer. The focus of the seminar is on the reader.

Maggie Debelius, in “What Do We Talk about When We Talk about Workshops?: Charting the First Five Weeks of a First-Year Writing Course,” discusses a variety of workshop techniques, including speed conferences, the listening workshop, modeling effective response, the research workshop, and the expert workshop. In “Texts to be Worked on and Worked with: Encouraging Students to See Their Writing as Theoretical,” Chris Warnick describes ways of working with student texts that encourage students to think of their writing as theoretical. Warnick believes that

getting students to appreciate the theoretical value of their work relates to my belief that first-year composition courses should provoke students to examine what it means to think like, read like, write like—to in fact *be*—an intellectual and

participate in real intellectual debates, both within and beyond the classroom. . . . I do, however, want my students to learn how to *do theory*, so to speak, because it is a persuasive and heuristic strategy used by intellectuals and because it is an important stage of the learning process. (163)

And he queries, “To approach student writing as theory, then, means to design workshops that ultimately ask this question: what can we as thinkers and writers *do* with the ideas in this student text?” (164). Although I found Warnick’s discussion and description of the writing workshop engaging and reflective, I found, as an experienced teacher, the other two essays on how to run a workshop elementary and self-explanatory. It could be that Warnick’s emphasis is not really on the writing workshop, but on the draft of an essay comparing the relationship between Kip and Hana in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* to the one between Rene Gallimard and Song Liling in David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, whereas other essays on the workshop address the workshop only. Another essay, Margaret J. Marshall’s “Writing to Learn, Reading to Teach,” describes a sequence of activities that help graduate students learn to read undergraduate papers looking for patterns, to use those patterns to shape instruction, and to develop whole-class activities that make use of specific pieces of student writing chosen for their pedagogical value.

The next few essays explore teaching formats beyond the conventional workshop or seminar. Muriel Harris, in “The Writer/Text Connection,” emphasizes the connection and the intertwining of student and text, the inseparability of writer and text, and offers some strategies to interact with students and their texts. Michele Eodice and Kami Day, in “Learning from Coauthoring: Composing Texts Together in the Composition Classroom,” focus on the learning that takes place when students read, revise, and comment on texts they collaboratively create in real time. In “Inquiry, Collaboration, and Reflection in the Student (Text)-Centered Multimodal Writing Course,” Scott L.

Rogers, Ryan Trauman, and Julia E. Kiernan offer three snapshots of work with student texts at three different stages of a multimodal composition course. Anne Ellen Geller and Frank R. Cantelmo, in “Workshopping to Practice Scientific Terms,” give another example of a workshop. They describe a collaborative project undertaken by them, that is, the creation of a reading and writing workshop for first-year honor students in a science class. Jane Mathison Fife’s “Bringing Outside Texts In and Inside Texts Out” describes how, over the years, student texts have become more central to her pedagogy as she brought them more and more into her class. The student texts she brings into class are both “outside texts,” written by students outside the class, and “inside” texts, written by students in the class as assignments for the class.

The book is predominately for teachers who are new to teaching writing or teaching writing with student texts, what the editors refer to as “TWiSTing” in the Afterword (244). Incidentally, the Afterword is useful and gives a thematic table of contents. It includes valuing student texts; ethics, representation, and pedagogy; the work student texts do; finding and selecting student texts; and teaching with student texts, becoming better teachers.

All the authors in the volume focus on the benefits and advantages of using TWiSTing. I would have liked some essays addressing the challenges and disadvantages of TWiSTing. The closest essay that addresses this is Rolf Norgaard’s “Embracing Uncertainty: The *Kairos* of Teaching with Student Texts,” the last essay in the collection, in which he examines four uncertainties: “How do I handle uncertainty? How do I handle evolving texts? How do I handle student perspectives? How do I handle myself?” As Norgaard writes,

students’ own writing can now serve in a variety of ways as the classroom text. Yet the centrality of student writing offers fresh challenges even to the veteran teacher, to say nothing of the risks it presents to those new to the classroom. . . . Gone are the certainties of traditional

writing pedagogies: fixed readings and predictable responses to them, not to mention the well-rehearsed lecture or lesson plan. A pedagogy focused on work in progress makes for an engaged, student-centered classroom, yet it requires major shifts in curricular orientation and teaching practice. (229)

One of the major shifts is our willingness to embrace the uncertainties that accompany teaching with student texts.

The essays in the volume guide the readers, especially new teachers, to discover their own informed practices of teaching with student texts. Overall, the book offers the convenience of a variety of essays in one single volume. It is informative and is solidly grounded in pedagogy and practice. The central thread, or theme, that connects the essays is that student texts are sites for students' and teachers' collaborative engagement and academic inquiry. Student writing is real writing and it matters. As the editors note, "TWiSTing shows our students that we value and honor their writing, their ideas, and the challenges they face" (247-248). If teaching with student texts helps students to become better writers, then it is indeed a transformative experience.