

A PROFESSIONAL REFERENCE BOOK

A Review/Essay

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Stephen N. and Susan J. Judy, *The English Teacher's Handbook* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, 1979).

I subscribe to the idea that reference books from which I can pick up just one valuable idea are well worth buying. Stephen and Susan Judy have loaded *The English Teacher's Handbook* with practical suggestions and sound philosophy. It is an excellent resource for prospective teachers, new teachers, seasoned teachers, department chairmen, English coordinators, and other administrators.

For new or prospective teachers, I found a wealth of ideas. Two sections that seem to me particularly stimulating and helpful discuss grading alternatives and teaching reading to the nonreader. New teachers always look for all the help they can get in devising a grading system that contributes to the educational process and can also be defended. The Judys give the reader a framework for sorting out the information that is important to grading, and they provide some effective alternatives for working with nonreaders, a reality that new teachers must be ready to face.

Right now I am teaching at West Lafayette High School with a seasoned staff: seven English teachers, average age 48. We know nearly everything! But, eureka! I discovered at least three chapters that even an English staff that knows almost everything can use. One of the most helpful sections in the book was the first chapter: "Course Planning and Design." Our teachers are always coming up with new courses. *The English Teacher's Handbook* contains seven criteria for a good course and offers many suggestions for selecting materials and designing activities. Another helpful chapter

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tells about using paraprofessionals and aides; this chapter provides an excellent checklist of activities for the teacher and aide to consider and gives alternatives for teachers who don't have an aide. The choice selection for the seasoned staffer, however, is Margaret Verble's "Education's Wax Museum," reprinted from the May 1976 issue of *The English Journal*. Verble involves the reader in a dialogue between a poet and a teacher and hits smack at the heart of one problem that teachers have in teaching poetry. All three of these selections are highly appropriate for staff members who are real pros.

For both novice and pro, three sections of *The English Teacher's Handbook* are particularly suitable. The most important one is on composition instruction. In the six chapters on composition, the authors provide the readers with important underlying assumptions, which is something one doesn't find very often in textbooks or even teachers' manuals. The authors also provide good suggestions for composition instruction in various modes of discourse. Chapter 16 focuses on composing through drama, Chapters 17 and 18, on persuasive writing for special audiences. The final chapter in this string of six chapters on composition makes useful suggestions for responding to students' papers. The Judys are at their best in this section on composition instruction.

However, they are also very good in Chapter 20, which describes language games that can be used in almost any class. Their treatment of language playfulness is exemplary and will be valued by any teacher. The Judys also provide exemplary treatment of television analysis and production in Chapter 25, "TV and English."

The English Teacher's Handbook even has something for the administrator. For example, most administrators will appreciate a section titled "Setting Instructional Priorities." Another of my favorites is Chapter 7, "Accountability and Assessment." The authors are persuasive in explaining why a number of accountability programs have failed, causing state educational agencies to lose millions and millions of dollars on their brainchild scan of skills programs.

One unique feature of the Judys' book is the listing of resources available to teachers. The addresses of English-related magazines and journals are listed along with addresses of publishers of professional and instructional materials, government resources, resources for contests, and re-

sources for free materials.

There are so many positive things to say about the Judys' book that it is easy to overlook weaknesses. Often the authors provide the raw stuff that makes one want to stand up and salute the two of them with, "Yeah! You said it, Judys!!!" Then in other instances, one puzzles over the rhetoric and asks, "What are you really saying, Judys?" For example, the authors make it a point to link their activities to underlying assumptions about a given discipline in the language arts. Before each major section of the book, they attempt to identify those assumptions which are most critical to the development of a given discipline. In discussing basic skills in writing instruction, they set up the reader with these excellent remarks:

... we feel that the push for basic skills instruction is misguided for two fundamental reasons:

First, the frontal attack on basics through grammar drill, workbook exercises, remedial reading activities, communication skills classes, spelling lessons, or the red penciling of themes has clearly *never* been successful in changing the language behavior of young people. English teachers *haven't* ignored basic skills; historically, they have taught very little else, and it manifestly *hasn't* worked. (p. 190-191)

Compare the clear, forceful style of writing in the previous paragraph to the bland writing in the following statements, which come from the authors' preface to the chapter on language.

... From the plethora of riches, what language do we choose to teach to assure that our students become better users of language? ... We'd like to suggest six.

1. What we choose to teach must be learnable by our students. . . .
2. What we choose to teach is not necessarily incorrectly chosen if it happens to be fun for us and for our students. . . .
3. What we choose to teach should be directed at least as much toward increasing student comfort with language as toward achieving surface correctness. . . .
4. What we choose to teach must be based on our understanding of how the language works. . . .

5. What we choose to teach must permit evaluations that focus on the positive, on what students can do, and not exclusively, or even mainly, on what they cannot do.
6. What we choose to teach must be centered on students' actual use of language. . . . (p. 255-256)

The nominative clause operating as the subject of each of the six sentences gets the writers into a lot of trouble. Using the nominative WHAT Clause, as in sentence three, invites obfuscation; repeating it puts the reader to sleep. Better sentence combining techniques are needed to produce workable tenets on teaching language.

In fact, I wish the Judys' book had included some explicit reference to sentence combining practices. I also wish it had included some specific instructional learning models and commentaries on the application of critical thinking instruction. All three topics are germane to important English instructional issues in the 1980s.

Well, even a good reference book can't include everything. Even though the book has omissions and even though it lacks rhetorical pizzazz in some sections, I consider the Judy and Judy book an excellent resource. Its format is varied enough to make reading generally interesting: straight exposition is accompanied by letters, rebuttals, scripts, poems, various survey instruments, well-designed lists, and a few sketches. Most importantly, the content is practical and the philosophy sound. The book abounds with good ideas.