

## Education Review

### Brief reviews for January 2010

Walther, Maria P. & Phillips, Katherine A. (2009). *Month-by-Month Trait-Based Writing Instruction: Grades K-2*. New York: Scholastic.

Pages: 190 Price: \$22.99 ISBN: 978-0-545-06693-8

Teachers and school librarians who work with the primary grades will appreciate this idea-packed addition to the Scholastic teacher resource collection. The cover of the book gives the reader an accurate and helpful indication of the practical contents within when it highlights "ready-to-use lessons and strategies for weaving morning messages, read-alouds, mentor texts, and more into your daily writing programs" and "targeted grammar lessons, focused genre explorations, annotated picture books" (cover). Authors Walther and Phillips share an exceptional compilation of try-it-tomorrow writing lessons here that both new and experienced teachers will be happy to discover. New teachers will find the high-quality instructional assistance that is sequenced through an entire school year to be immensely supportive, while experienced teachers will find many new ideas here for morning messages, writing workshop mini-lessons and for integrating children's literature into the writing program. Both public and school librarians will be thrilled at the number and quality of children's fiction and non-fiction books that Walther and Phillips use as mentor texts and read-alouds, and the "Children's Literature Cited" list included at the back of the book will serve as a valuable collection development tool for classroom, school, and public libraries. Those who want to acquire the children's books used in the lessons will be grateful to Walther and Phillips for their selection of fairly recently published popular titles, so that many are likely to still be available for purchase.

The ready-to-use lesson ideas are prefaced by a foundational chapter that explains what Walther and Phillips understand by balanced writing instruction and why they use the teaching strategies presented in the book. In this opening conversation, the authors set the context for the lessons that follow and provide the research-based evidence that supports their classroom activities. Right from these opening pages the authors make it clear that their writing lessons emerge from their use of children's literature, noting that they "couldn't teach writing without a stack of enticing books" (p. 16). For teachers who are always looking for new books to integrate into their writing program, Walther and Phillips are a fabulous source to turn to. Readers will appreciate the detailed and focused attention given to the mechanics of the teaching of writing in this opening chapter. From discussions of what, how, and when to teach specific skills, to helpful descriptions of why and how to use modeled, shared, interactive, guided and independent writing, Walther and Phillips lead readers through their experiences with teaching writing. This is professional development at its most practical and helpful. In this chapter and in the monthly lesson chapters that follow, the targeted writing topics are accompanied by clear diagrams (for ex. Balanced Writing Instruction, p. 10), samples of student work and classroom photos (often featuring the board with the morning message), helpful charts (for example, "The Sample Daily Schedule," p. 23), and framed key points (for example,

"What Does Guided Writing Look Like?" p. 21). These well-designed features make this a book that is easy to browse, so the lack of an index is not a problem.

Although the remaining chapters follow a writing program as it unfolds through a school year, Walther and Phillips are quick to point out that teachers should adapt, select, and modify their lessons and ideas to fit into the teacher's own program. Teachers who want to do this will find it easy to modify the clearly-presented plans that Walther and Phillips share. Each monthly chapter is set up following the same 3-part structure: part 1 offers multiple examples of that month's "Morning Message" ideas followed by suggested "Read-Alouds for Writers"; part 2 offers a "Menu of Mini-Lessons"; and part 3 provides a suggestion for a "Genre Exploration" study that incorporates learning covered in the month's morning messages and mini-lessons. The mini-lessons consistently include detailed information on the teacher's preparation, in-class explanations and demonstrations, and on the teacher's invitation to the students to write – again conveniently making these lesson ideas easily adaptable – especially for using with different children's books than the ones chosen by the authors.

My only disappointment with this otherwise sensational teacher guide is with the last chapter where the genre exploration focuses on “Delving Into Nonfiction – From Research to Writing.” Instead of encouraging the development of a question as the first step in the research process, the research task here appears to be a simple retelling of facts – with no apparent purpose or audience. As Carol Koechlin and Sandi Zwaan note in *Q Tasks*, "we need to create an environment where asking questions is recognized as part of the learning process, where it is applauded, where it is encouraged and spontaneous" (Koechlin and Zwaan, 2006, p. 11). Even in the early years the development of simple questions can be included as a part of the research task, so that the fact-finding and documentation is meaningful. This questioning piece could easily be built into the nonfiction genre exploration lesson presented here by spending time before the fact-hunt on developing a question the student wants to find the answer to. Since Walther and Phillips themselves encourage readers to modify their ideas, this final lesson is perhaps one that a teacher could modify to include an authentic information-seeking component. The flexibility of Walther and Phillips ideas is evident here, as this lesson can easily be extended and built upon. The mini-lessons provided by the authors in their genre explorations can all accommodate additional lessons – and this is one of the best features of their work.

Scholastic has done a great job here of designing a visually appealing book that portrays the inventive ideas of the authors in a clear and easily accessible format. This is a highly recommended title for every primary grade teacher and most especially for every faculty of education library. Primary grade teachers are always interested in learning how other teachers are integrating children's literature into their teaching, and looking for lesson ideas to add to their own set of instructional strategies. Walther and Phillips are to be congratulated for their willingness to share in such helpful detail so many of their proven-successful teaching strategies for balanced writing instruction.

References

Koehlin, C. & Zwaan, S. (2006). Q tasks: How to empower students to ask questions and care about answers. Markham, ON: Pembroke.

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