# Book Review

## *In the Middle*

**Nancie Atwell.**
**Portsmouth, New Hampshire:**
**Boynton/Cook, 1987**
**by**
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Nancie Atwell has taught junior high school English in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, since 1975. *In The Middle* is her description of how she teaches reading and writing to eighth graders and of the evolution in her thinking that has led her to these practices. Although her situation may differ from that of many English teachers—Boothbay Harbor is a small, all white community—her approach to teaching and her understanding of adolescents have much to offer secondary teachers in any setting. For junior high school lauguage arts teachers in particular, this is an important book, one to add to their own professional libraries and read soon.

One of its striking features is that it shows how the ideas of Donald Graves and his associates can function in a junior high school setting. A major point Atwell makes is that such an approach not only works at this level, but that it is the most sensible way to teach a junior high school language arts class. She explains her rationale in an early chapter, "Making the Best of Adolescence," where her description of the special characteristics of this age group has a ring of accuracy any junior high teacher will recognize. Atwell's experience is that the ideas of Graves (and other writing teachers she admires—Susan Sowers, Lucy Calkins, Dixie Goswami, and Donald Murray) succeed best in a workshop setting. And she believes that such a setting capitalizes on the special characteristics of junior-high-aged students.

One of Atwell's considerations is that junior high students need to move, as do real writers and readers. Therefore, she arranges her classroom so that students can move purposefully among various areas to find books of every kind, writing materials, many kinds of references and resources, as well as places for response and solitude. Another way the workshops acknowledge the needs of this age group is that they are structured to let students assume control and responsibility. In the sessions, eighth graders write on topics they have chosen and read books they have selected. Atwell brings social relationships, which come first with this age group, into the classroom and puts them to work in the kind of on-the-job conversation that happens when students talk to one another, one-to-one or in small groups, about their reading and writing. Atwell credits Dixie Goswami, a teacher at The Bread Loaf School of English Program in Writing, for leading her to an understanding of the three basic principles that underlie the workshop method and that account for its success: time, ownership, and response.

Because Atwell's reputation as an innovative teacher has spread, Donald Graves and eleven other University of New Hampshire professors visited her classroom in the

winter of 1983. At day's end, Graves remarked, "You know what makes you such a good writing teacher? You're so damned organized." Atwell acknowledges the accuracy of this description in explaining how her writing workshop is set up. She provides time for writers to compose—regular, frequent chunks of in-class writing time that students come to depend on and plan for. She arranges for the quiet that writers need both to write and to talk about writing. She has developed procedures to help students choose their own writing topics. To provide for response to an evolving piece of student writing, she organizes the room and the class periods so that she can talk regularly with every writer and so that writers can also discuss their drafts with their peers.

On a typical day she begins the class with a five to ten minute mini-lesson about writing, ranging from procedural matters (such as how the workshop functions, what happens in various parts of the room, evaluation criteria), to craft-of-writing lessons (how to revise, brainstorming techniques, conclusions, etc.) to skills (format concerns, punctuation problems, spelling, etc.). This lesson is followed by a quick status-of-the-class check, during which students tell her two things about their current work—their topics and their plans for the day's workshop. Next comes the heart of the workshop: at least thirty minutes of writing and conferring. A five to seven minute group sharing session, during which participation is totally voluntary, ends the day's workshop.

As Atwell explains how each segment of the day works, readers learn more about other distinctive features of her program. One constant for students is that they receive immediate response in person from her during their writing, rather than in written comments at the end. Her techniques for providing this response, with suggestions for readers to follow, are the book's most valuable features. She offers specific ideas about how to get around to all students in one class period and for ways to keep the paper's ownership in the hands of the writer. For instance, she advises teachers not to write on a paper at all until it is turned in as a finished product at which time (because she has already given much oral input during conferences) she marks only the kinds of errors an editor would mark. She suggests ways to keep the conference short and centered on content. She offers her ideas about the kinds of questions to ask, the order a conference should follow, and the kinds of pitfalls to guard against (like resisting the urge to talk, her notion of the hardest part of conferring).

Other specific ideas include a plan for setting up writing folders, a method for evaluating the term's work, lists of suggestions for mini-lessons, rules for students to follow during the half-hour writing period, procedures for running the "group share" segments, and techniques for helping students discover their own topics. The book's appendix contains other items and strategies useful in operating the workshop. Among them are lists of student writing contests and publications that accept student work, the writing survey she uses to begin and end the year, and lists of kinds of writing that have emerged in Boothbay's writing workshops.

Some of the features Atwell uses in her writing workshops are also present in the reading workshops. She stresses the importance of providing students with in-class reading time and of letting them select their own books. Each day's reading workshop begins with a mini-lesson (procedures of the workshop, "literature" discussions, or skills instruction). As with the writing mini-lessons, these are short, since the major



activity is in-class, silent reading. During this period of independent reading, Atwell moves among students for the first ten minutes, then sits and reads too. She argues persuasively for allowing students to include in their reading young adult books. Her point is that some of this work has literary merit, but, even more important, it is literature that mirrors and celebrates the emerging power of the adolescent mind. Atwell's students read an average of 35 books per student each year, a result she believes happens because she gives them so much freedom of choice.

One of Atwell's most innovative practices is the use of a *dialogue journal* as a way she and her students communicate about their reading. Among the many examples of student writing she includes in her book are samples of exchanges with her students taken from these journals. Included, too, are principles for responding to student's entries, ideas for setting up and monitoring a student-to-student exchange about literature, and clearly spelled out procedures for initiating and maintaining dialogue journals and for evaluating students' works in the reading workshop.

*In the Middle* is a rich resource for teachers. For those who are ready to "dive in" totally, there is a great wealth of detailed information to serve as a guide. For teachers who are not persuaded to take such a total immersion, there is much to select from as a beginning point. And Nancie Atwell would applaud this tentative beginning; she describes her own odyssey as one of hesitation and disbelief, and one that is still evolving. Her words express this sentiment best:

> All the particular methods of writing and reading workshop grow from my particular experience; I'm hoping other teachers, in sharing my experience, will grow right along with me. After all, if I've ended up here, anyone can.