Teaching as an Unfinished Conversation

by
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Rev. of Seeing Yourself as a Teacher: Conversations with Five New Teachers in a University Writing Program, by Elizabeth Rankin. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994. 137 pages. Paper. $12.95; $9.95, members.

You can pick up a copy of Seeing Yourself as a Teacher, flip to the back cover's promotional blurb, and find a very accurate description of the questions, topics, and ideas you'll encounter in this slim NCTE published volume:

> Rankin invites us to listen as the new teachers talk about everything from their relationships with students to their pedagogical theories to their ideas about their roles as writing teachers. She also invites us to reflect, as she does, on some of the questions that emerge from these conversations: How do we integrate the personal and professional in our lives? Why do some teachers resist the whole concept of theory? How do the teachers we've known influence the teachers we will be? Why do some people struggle more than others to see themselves as teachers?

What the blurb will not tell you is this: the conversations between Rankin and five new teachers, between these teachers and the book's readers, between Rankin-as-ethnographer and Rankin-as-teacher, and among generations of teachers (including the many generations represented in one single teacher) are absolutely absorbing, provocative, useful, and renewing. Like Rankin, "I plunged ahead, reading the TAs, reading their students, reading (always) myself" (3).

Because this is a short book I was able to read it twice—once at a quick pace while I was teaching, again over a more leisurely winter break; each time I was drawn most closely to the conversations involving Rankin and two teaching assistants identified as Keith and Meredith. Of the five teaching assistants—also including Mike, Peter, and Alex—only Keith and Meredith are represented in

the pages in conversation together. Where this link emerges, the talk draws me in, engages me in reflective responding and thinking. One month after I've reread the book I find myself coming back to underlined, annotated, dog-eared pages marking a trail of ideas I cannot leave behind. In flipping back to these marked pages, I hear the words of Mike, Peter, Alex—and sometimes Rankin—more clearly because I have listened to Keith and Meredith.

As Keith and Meredith, for example, read "gender" in their shaping of and experience as "teacher," I was drawn to their considerations of individual socialization and personality, of normed images of teacher and lived experience in constructing "teacher," of how gendered restrictions affected both teacher and student behaviors and expectations. This conversation is, I think, also an example of the places where Rankin's ethnographic recording and interpretation made me want to talk back, to join in the making of meaning (the making of theory) regarding gender and teaching. Keith, a gay man, and Meredith, the only woman in this group of talking TAs, might have talked about various interconnections—between gender and sexuality, between students' expectations and instructors' enactment of "teacher" or "professor," and between social/economic class background and gender, whether of teacher or student. Because Rankin's narrative—especially the three interchapters—invites more conversation, more meaning-making, I don't feel a sense of frustration when these interconnections are "missed" in the conversations and analysis presented. It occurs to me that these ideas will occur off-page not only to the conversationalists bound by this book, but also among the conversations let loose as people read Rankin's text. The meaning-making will continue.

Meaning-making is the work of this book. Rankin listens to the talk of new teachers and to the talk of new teaching ideas and theories playing in her mind. With her we are always asked to consider how "I" fit as a teacher, how programs and practices construct "teacher" and "good writing," how teacher talk shapes theoretical thinking, how we might use teacher talk to challenge (interrogate) theoretical language, how various personal acts and responses of teaching come to shape institutionalized practices, and how conventions or discourses of current writing pedagogy might be at odds with various world views (one teacher's, many teachers', many students').

In the end—as in the beginning and middle—it is the questions and the pauses to reflect and respond that shape Rankin's book. Sometimes the questions, as she notes, work to reveal ways in which "teaching writing is a personal act" (126) that tends to be heard behind closed doors, where one hopes for the safety of meaning-making among friends. Rankin's Seeing Yourself as a Teacher lets readers not only listen to six teachers as they grow, out loud; this uncloseted thinking—about teaching and students, about "teacher" as a shape shifting role, about writing pedagogies that match or challenge our ideas about the world—reintroduces those who would listen to the language of public intellectuals engaging in private-public work. I look forward to continuing the talk—and to drawing on this book as I talk. I haven't finished conversations with Libby Rankin or with the new, evolving teachers I met in this book. I haven't finished the conversations with my own teaching and students that this book has begun.