Strategic Writing: The Writing Process and Beyond in the Secondary English Classroom

Deborah Dean is a teacher’s teacher. Her writing is well informed, sharp, clear, and very, very useable. If you’re looking for a text that will be pleasant to read, will help you become a smarter teacher of writing, and give you some new things to try on Monday morning, Strategic Writing: The Writing Process and Beyond in the Secondary English Classroom will fit the bill. Readers will find a wealth of well-researched, easy-to-follow advice and sources to help their students develop what Dean calls a “strategic approach” to writing. For Dean, writing process is not a way to organize a course, or even an assignment; Dean teaches process as a set of strategies to be employed by critically thoughtful writers in a manner consistent with the particular instance of the piece being written.

I use writing more frequently to promote learning, not just to show learning. . . . Assignments are a means to an end, not simply ends in themselves. They are ways to practice strategies, to consider processes and differences in products and how different products require different processes to create them. (xvi)

Dean takes up an authentic approach to writing that is grounded in real-world purposes, audiences, and contexts. Why? “The focus is on transfer—making sure students consider how their individual use of strategies might be useful to them when they write in the future and outside of class” (xvii; italics added). If we teach the writing process only to have students learn one way to produce one form of writing that they’ll never write again—school writing—what was the point?

The Strategies

Dean’s book was already popular enough to go into a new edition. This new edition shows a writing teacher with her eyes open wider to the realities of teaching today. Here, Dean presents a “response to a changing climate in writing instruction: tests and standards and an emphasis on certain kinds of writing” (ix). She says many of her revisions “were made in an effort to help teachers better understand an overall strategic approach that can counter the testing climate that pervades many schools” (x).

As her writing advice would likely suggest, Dean’s book is not confrontational but rather strategic in its counter to writing instruction that is lock-step and focused on passing standardized exams. Readers will still enjoy a journey with a caring, clever teacher who shares stories from her life and reflections from her classroom. The lesson plans presented will help students develop a fuller understanding of the project of writing, so they can pass tests and develop transferable writing skills that will serve them beyond school.

The Second Edition

The chapters in Strategic Writing follow a fairly standard version of writing process, covering inquiry, drafting, and revising, but the subtitles exemplify the nuance: “Developing Content,” “Investigating Genre,” “Considering Audience and Purpose,” “Global [Revision],” and “Local [Revision].” Each chapter begins with a
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story from Dean’s life and ends with a reflection, presumably pages from her teaching journal, revealing the author’s successful and sometimes challenged attempts to teach all her students to be strategic writers. In these stories, readers will learn that Dean once used up a lot of skin and blood to learn a coveted skill, used writing to take on an underhanded mechanic, and married a man who doesn’t mind playing pranks on his grandchildren’s teachers. They will also learn that Dean still works on improving her craft and is open about her uncertainties. In short, she is a gifted veteran teacher with the confidence and wisdom to show she’s still learning. The word “ARGGH!” makes an appearance. In one especially appealing moment, Dean reflects on her decision to engage even struggling students in complex writing assignments:

Many of my colleagues say that lower-performing students should just have prescribed forms for writing, that the complex considerations that constitute genres are too much for them. It’s tempting sometimes to go there, to reduce genre to forms, when the students are struggling, when working with mentor texts seems so daunting. Still, the rewards of some of them getting it seem to make it worth it. I think. I hope. (42).

It’s affirming to read a veteran teacher struggle hopefully to champion her students in the face of challenges only other teachers can truly understand.

Highlights

*Strategic Writing* is essentially a list of great ideas and advice. Each chapter includes ideas and strategies for helping students to work as writers in sophisticated ways. In the chapters on inquiry, Dean discusses “inquiry paths,” using art to inspire writing, talking as a prewriting strategy, using mentor texts, annotating texts, mapping texts, and more. About drafting, Dean gives background and suggestions for employing analysis of “audience considerations,” use of peers as an audience, close analysis of purpose, and shorter writing assignments. In her focus on revisions, global and local, Dean considers using time, “fat drafting” (which she borrows from Wendy Bishop [65]), genre switching, outlining an existing draft, and peer feedback.

Of all the strategies Dean discusses, I have a few favorites. One is Dean’s focus on modeling processes and reflecting on them. Dean knows students don’t develop transferrable writing skills by accident. “[J]ust doing something doesn’t automatically make us better at it . . . But repetition combined with instruction or direction or modeling or scaffolding can help. And that’s what strategic writing should encourage—not just doing the assigned writing but practicing it with strategies and then considering the effectiveness of those strategies” (13). Dean is consistent with her advice, offering myriad models of her writing assignments—in a goldmine of appendices that include creative lesson plans and engaging classroom-ready assignment ideas from her classes—and reflections on her teaching in each chapter.

Dean also has a playful, if understated, sense of humor that appears not only in her personal writing at the beginning and end of each chapter but also in some of her reading selections for her students. To introduce the concept of genre, Dean uses Dr. Ernest Drake’s *Dragonology: The Complete Book of Dragons*, a waggish encyclopedia of fictional creatures that includes charts, graphs, maps, and other genres (31). She shares a young student’s innocently hilarious directions for safely petting a sting ray (Step 1: “Go to an aquarium that lets you pet sting rays” [33]), and she suggests a lesson plan using “Fractured Fairytales.”

Finally, Dean’s ideas for generating “peer feedback” (not peer review or peer editing) are excellent. Getting good advice from peers on one’s writing is a crucial lifelong skill that is not easily taught. Dean explains ways to help students understand what feedback is, see the difference between helpful and unhelpful feedback, and use sentence starters for valuable responses to peers’ writing (70–76).

*Strategic Writing* is a highly recommended resource for the teacher who wants students who learn to think as writers, so they can be successful as thinkers and writers in and beyond school.

*Gamify Literacy: Boost Comprehension, Collaboration and Learning*

Edited by Michele Haiken.
International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), 2017.

Teaching is not all fun and games, but learning should be. The more fun, the higher the engagement, the more learning. People play games voluntarily for fun. And, as Vygotsky knew almost a hundred
Games in the Classroom: Planning, Playing, Learning

Haiken and her co-authors provide a range of resources to assist teachers in gamifying their classes, including an excellent one-page glossary of gamification concepts that will get even a newbie quickly up to speed and excited about learning more. Following a short but comprehensive introduction, the book provides chapters in three sections.

Section One, “The Sandbox: Open-Ended, Go-Anywhere Style of Play,” includes a chapter on using space travel as a theme for gamifying research papers. The author, librarian Sheena Kelly, asks students to pilot their “brainship” to gather information from the “Veritas Galaxy” to outwit the “Luddites” who are trying to conquer the galaxy. Along the way, students earn “corpus coins” for exhibiting specific research and writing skills, which get them privileges. While they are working together to beat the Luddites, the students also learn about informational texts, including how to identify credible sources and to avoid misinformation found on the Internet. To demonstrate and crystallize their real learning, Kelly has her students reflect on the things they learned about informational literacy.

Another standout essay describes how author Tisha Richmond uses individual and team digital badges (among other gamification strategies) to engage students in her culinary arts class. In attempting to become a “Master Chef,” earning three Michelin Stars, students also reach several different status levels (“Apprentice,” “Sous Chef,” and “Master Chef”). With each new status, students earn an academic privilege; for example, earning “Apprentice” allows a student to bring a 3 × 5 card with notes to the next unit test (56).

One of the things I really like about this book is that most of the chapters include discussions of gaming and the learning philosophy of the teacher, and most of them have designed games that engage students deeper in their learning. Critics like Alfie Kohn have noted that rewards often interfere with student learning, but when the reward in a learning game encourages the students to immerse themselves in deeper learning, the reward is a victory for learning.

Section Two, “Homebrews and Game Sharks: Gamification Strategies and Tools to Utilize Across Content Areas,” offers eight chapters, each of which describes a more complicated game and introduces readers to gamification technology. The games include scavenger hunts, an activity based on the popular television show Amazing Race, a World War I trench battle simulation, a review game called “Grudgeball,” and a high-level game climax called a “Boss Battle.” These essays show a remarkable range of creativity and will, I predict, make most readers jealous of the students in these classrooms.

One unfortunate exception is a chapter on Classcraft, an increasingly popular behavior
management program that uses gamification strategies. This chapter at least has the benefit of making clear the limits of gamification. Used well, gamification can excite students, open their minds, and put their learning on steroids. Used less appropriately, games are simply a high-tech Skinner box in which students are manipulated like pecking chickens by rewards and punishments—exactly the concern Alfie Kohn has frequently raised. Classcraft, in this author’s opinion, tends toward the latter. In this game, students earn points by “completing learning tasks or meeting learning objectives, completing class jobs, participating in group work, or behaving appropriately” (80; italics added). And, if students lose points, they experience “consequences,” such as “cleaning a teacher’s closet” or “writing a paragraph” (80). These consequences have nothing to do with academic learning, and using writing as punishment is practically medieval. The other chapters in this section offer great ideas for raising student engagement in intellectually stimulating and less manipulative ways.

Section Three, which offers some of the best information in the book, is playfully titled, “Cheats: Gamification Strategies for Success.” These essays align high-level and in-depth gamification strategies with sound pedagogical practice, encouraging teachers to use the best of gaming theory to enhance their students’ learning. One of the best essays, “Head of the Class: Designing Effective Leaderboards for Gamified Learning Environments,” by Chris Hesselbein, discusses the manipulative possibilities of gaming and how to ensure that teachers use games ethically. For example, Hesselbein shows how leaderboards operate according to “fame and shame,” and he explains strategies that increase the fame while eliminating the shame. He even develops strategies that engage students for whom classroom fame is not a personal goal (108). He also prioritizes the learning over the rewards (and grades): “If the task [the game] is truly engaging for a student, they partake in the task for the sake of learning, not because of the anticipated grade” (116). Other essays in this section take up how digital badges can be used in ways in which they are “neither carrot nor stick” in the classroom, but are rather effective ways to help students develop “mastery, autonomy, and purpose” (Linane 140).

Is Gamification a Winner?
For the teacher interested in learning how creative minds have used gaming and the Internet to engage today’s learners, this is a terrific book. An extra benefit is that every chapter is aligned with specific Standards of the International Society for Technology in Education, exemplifying the pedagogical soundness of the strategies and unifying the purposes of the chapters.

As Hesselbein points out, gamification “is not ground-breaking because it is just what great teachers already do. Gamification is just sound teaching repackaged into a game in order to unlock a higher level of student engagement and ownership” (116). Since student engagement and ownership are the most important ingredients in our work, we teachers should learn more about gamification and how it can enhance students’ learning.

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