

## **Making a Way Out of No Way**

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Book review of Skerrett, A., & Smagorinsky, P. (2022). [\*Teaching literacy in troubled times: Identity, inquiry, and social action at the heart of instruction\*](#). Corwin Press.

The last few years have laid bare the critical need for school experiences that help students develop the ability to conduct careful research on questions of sociopolitical significance; to have respectful conversations across differences of opinion, experience, and identity; and to develop strategic, collaborative plans for action. At the same time, standardized testing and curriculum continue to make teaching to these needs challenging, if not impossible.

*Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times* by Allison Skerrett and Peter Smagorinsky offers thoughtful and practical guidance for educators who are up for this challenge. With chapters on identity, critical inquiry, social change advocacy, empathy and understanding, racial literacy, and disputed terms, this book's focus is education for civic responsibility and the development of an informed and engaged populace. It aims to support the development of teachers and students who are equipped to consistently practice "inquiry and investigation and insights" (p. 4) in the world as it is and as it might become.

Each of the book's six chapters first describes and defines a theme relevant to our current sociopolitical context before outlining methods for how teachers might teach the chapter's theme in the classroom. These descriptions are followed by "in practice" sections that show how teachers around the country have used these methods in their classrooms. For these sections, the authors shared an early draft of each chapter with a classroom teacher, who then developed a unit using the chapter. One thing I noticed throughout the book is that each chapter speaks to the others, creating an organic whole that offers an overarching orientation to teaching and learning with justice, critical inquiry, and concrete action at its core.

Each chapter offers guiding questions, class activities and assignments, and assessments. Regarding the last of these, I appreciate the recognition in Chapter 2 that "many teachers are required to issue grades frequently, which tends to work against process-oriented teaching" (p. 72). Standardized grading practices have never fit neatly with critical pedagogies, creating ethical struggles for many teachers (including me). However, since many teachers must grade, the authors provide example rubrics to support teachers in grading without reproducing the potentially detrimental effects of direct evaluation on students' social-emotional learning. For example, in Chapter 4, "Teaching Empathy and Understanding," the authors offer several suggestions related to grading student work without veering into "the judgmental role of grading empathic growth" (p. 142).

The authors also address the risks inherent in social justice-oriented classrooms, especially in our current moment of moral panic over concepts such as critical race theory and gender identity. This social reality requires a careful and practical approach to social justice in the classroom. We see one version of this intentional caution in Chapter 3, when a teacher, Alex, presents her plans to teach a unit on social change to school administration "using language that she knew would

not raise undue concern” (p. 99). Like teachers in other chapters, Alex takes care to connect her plans for the unit to official learning standards and goals.

As I read *Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times*, I thought about my undergraduate secondary English teacher candidates. Every year, I find that their field experiences make them more fatalistic about teacher agency. Although they enjoy reading about and discussing critical approaches to the ELA classroom, they express doubts about enacting such approaches, sometimes wondering what the point is of studying teaching methods they won't be able to implement. For this reason, I was grateful for this book's descriptions of how teachers managed challenges that arose in response to the themes and topics they taught as well as the time their units required.

This book reminded me how many teachers proceed with courage and integrity despite the challenges they face from policymakers, community members, and sometimes their own administrators and colleagues. These are teachers who are making a way out of what can sometimes, on bad days, seem like no way at all.

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