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Book Review: Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing

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Rural Voices, a collection of pedagogical essays from ten rural Nebraska elementary and secondary teachers, members of the Nebraska Writing Project’s Rural Voices, Country Schools team, combines theory and practice to connect students and teachers with their surrounding communities, teaching them “to live well, actively, and fully in a given place.” Robert Brooke’s introduction begins, as does each of the essays, with a personal story about his connection to the Great Plains. Since “[l]ocal communities, regions, and histories are the places where we shape our individual lives,” Brooke believes, they are essential to making education and writing relevant to students.

In the first essay, Sandy Bangert focuses on literacy education in her first-through-fourth-grade Stapleton rural school, studying literature that celebrates local communities, collecting family stories, and investigating local history. She provides many useful examples of books exploring life in farming communities and describes her development of a community writing club. Phip Ross of Waverly High assigns regional authors, invites local townspeople to his writing classes, and takes his students on field trips to spur creative writing.

In Henderson, Sharon Bishop’s students study Nebraska writers, collect oral histories to create subjects for poetry and essays, and experience the prairie to enrich their nature writing. Bev Wilhelm of Syracuse also uses family stories, community history, and unusual field trips to instill a sense of pride and respect for neighborhoods. In addition, she partners her students with elementary students as well as military veterans to make connections through the generations. To foster community awareness, Judith K. Schafer’s students of Wayne visit with the town’s entrepreneurs and pair with senior citizens for a journal exchange.

Students in Rising City, led by Amy Hottovy, become involved in a Community Journal Project that centers on the threat of school consolidation, while in Cedar Bluffs High School, Robyn A. Dalton institutes a Career Discernment Project, linking students with local businesses. Carol MacDaniels discusses the Nebraska Writing Project’s Rural Institute Program and its goal of establishing a community in the classroom, promoting the heritage, history, and culture of Nebraska.

Marian Matthews, mentor from the University of New Mexico, concludes the collection by reasserting the importance of the National Writing Project’s goal of exemplary teachers sharing their writing practices with each other and stressing the importance of schooling “grounded within the rich context of individual communities and local places” rather than homogenized “big-mart education.”

Rural Voices has much to offer, not only in the diversity of its individual voices but also in the specific practices, assignments, and results provided by the teachers within the collection.

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