

A Writer Reforms (the Teaching of) Writing: Donald Murray and the Writing Process Movement, 1963–1987 by Michael J. Michaud, *The WAC Clearinghouse*, University Press of Colorado, 2023. 150 pp.

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“Writing is a process not product” (11) has become a slogan for compositionists and writing pedagogues ever since Donald Murray published his short, yet reformatory and impactful essay, *Teach Writing as a Process not Product*, in 1972. This seminal work is groundbreaking because it advocated the process theory of composition, challenging the prevailing expressivist approach. Many scholars have written books and articles about Murray and his work. For example, Chris Madigan applies and consistently adheres to Murray’s concept of “responsive teaching” (76). Bruce Ballenger, on the other hand, recounts his personal relationship with Murray and explores Murray’s “surprise pedagogy,” detailing Murray’s response to rejections from prestigious journals that labeled his work as “Murrayesque” (297). Those writers have effectively introduced Murray and part of his work to the audience within and beyond composition studies. However, Michael J. Michaud’s monograph *A Writer Reforms (the Teaching of) Writing* provides a comprehensive and thorough exploration of Murray’s transformative efforts spanning his career as a writer, writing teacher, and researcher. It depicts Murray as a reformer by presenting evidence from Murray’s life and works and tracing the evolution of his influence on writing pedagogy from his tenure at the University of New Hampshire and beyond.

A Writer Reforms (the Teaching of) Writing is organized into four chapters, preceded by an introduction about common discussions surrounding Murray. In chapter one, Michaud explores Murray’s early background to uncover the factors contributing to his transformation into a reformer later in his career. Chapters two and three delineate the process of reformation and specific incidents at the school and university levels during Murray’s initiation of reforms in writing instructions. This involves his collaboration with school teachers and university professors, leading to the introduction of courses aligned with his reformed approach. In chapter four, Michaud highlights Murray’s collaboration with Donald Graves and other scholarly endeavors, showcasing their significance in his evolution as both a writer and a reformer in his later years. Finally, in the conclusion, Michaud shares how Murray’s work and legacy continue to influence writing education. Overall, Michaud’s book describes the important events and highlights from Murray’s life and work, which establishes him as a “reformer” in the realm of writing pedagogy.

In the introduction of this book, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Donald Murray: From Expressivist to Reformer,” Michaud highlights that Murray’s work laid the groundwork for other scholars’ research yet is often overlooked.. For example, Michaud points out that Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s collection, *Naming What We Know*, contains articles explicitly influenced by Donald Murray’s work between 1963 and 2006, but he is never cited. Interestingly, narratives about Murray spanning decades depict him either as a “Great Man” or as an “expressivist.” However, Michaud argues that “Donald Murray should be recognized not merely as an advocate for a singular approach to composition pedagogy but as a reformer of the academic discipline of English” (7-8). This perspective is substantiated by Michaud’s research into Murray’s work and life since 2009, as detailed in the book *A Writer Reforms (the Teaching of) Writing*. Michaud’s study not only explores the root of Murray as a reformer but also traces his impact and legacy in the field.

Chapter one, “Roots of a Reformer,” describes the early years of Murray as an educational and disciplinary reformer. Michaud begins this chapter by asserting that “Murray was an accidental reformer” (25), noting a lack of evidence that Murray actively sought to become a reformer. However, through an examination of Murray’s literacy narrative, which details his upbringing in a working-class city during the Great Depression, Michaud uncovers the profound personal motivations behind Murray’s journey towards reform.e.. Michaud states that, silenced by his teachers and bullied by his peers during his youth, Murray recognized the transformative potential of listening, which he believed could empower students with a sense of “autonomy and authority” (34). Michaud links Murray’s reform efforts to these childhood experiences, which led him to find the “why of his reform” (41).

From chapter two, titled “Becoming a Writer Teaching Writing, 1963-1971,” Michaud examines the development of Murray’s educational reforms. Michaud discusses how Murray’s early teaching experiences from 1963 to 1971 catalyzed his major reforms. He also explores how Murray found a gap in K-12 teacher education and the importance of partnership with school teachers, exemplified by his collaboration with the New England School Development Council (NESDEC). Michaud particularly details Murray’s collaboration with Richard Goodman, the superintendent of schools in Hollis and the dedicatee of the first edition of Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing*, to train 200 New England English teachers in using a “writer-based” approach. Throughout this chapter, Michaud provides a comprehensive and analytical examination of Murray’s influential book, illustrating how its curriculum transforms teachers into listeners and establishes Murray as a reformer within the field. By chronologically presenting events from Murray’s teaching and writing careers, Michaud keeps readers engaged and deepens their understanding of Murray’s impact.

In chapter three, “Transforming a Local Writing Tradition, 1971-1977,” Michaud focuses on Murray’s reforms in higher education, with a specific emphasis on initiatives at the college level. Michaud describes Murray’s efforts to design and experiment with a new type of college writing class, collaborating with colleagues at University of New Hampshire (UNH) to reform college classrooms. The new college composition course that Murray developed between 1966 and 1971 evolved into a successful program, which reformed UNH’s English curriculum. According to Michaud, this initiative gave Murray “the chance to become a kind of writing researcher” (68). Michaud emphasizes the importance of collegial collaboration and its transformative impact on institutions. His chronological storytelling highlights the inspiring potential of collaboration, aiming to motivate college-level writing teachers to work together for the betterment of writing programs and students’ success.

In chapter four, “Joining the Writing Research Conversation, 1977-1987,” Michaud explores Murray’s final decade of growth and innovation as a writing teacher and researcher. He also depicts how Murray and his collaborators reformed composition pedagogy across institutional boundaries, illustrating how his influence extended beyond UNH to broader academic territories. For instance, Michaud describes Murray’s collaboration with literacy pioneer Donald Graves from 1975, addressing writing instruction issues in New Hampshire and beyond. This partnership, as Michaud states, benefited scholars by challenging traditionalist views on literacy development and introducing Graves’s “process-conference” approach (84). Further, he notes Murray’s numerous workshops to illustrate his relentless dedication, stating, “Death, it seems, was the only thing that could put an end to his evangelizing” (99). Michaud employs a varied approach, combining lists and narratives, to ensure readers connect with and appreciate Murray’s contributions in multiple ways.

In the concluding chapter, “A Reformer’s Legacy,” Michaud highlights Murray’s transformative contributions to and lasting impact on writing education. Additionally, he explores Murray’s personal disappointments with mainstream journals, shedding light on the challenges and roadblocks Murray faced and reaffirming his role in reforming writing pedagogy. This is a nice way of encouraging readers by showing how failures become a pillar of one’s success. Michaud concludes by emphasizing Murray’s efforts to democratize writing and inspire emerging writers to become the “writer of their dreams” (114). This conclusion serves as a tribute to Murray’s contributions and a call to continue embracing his progressive ideals in writing education.

Michael J. Michaud’s book is a captivating read for individuals who are interested in Donald Murray’s work or in exploring critical perspectives on it, appealing to a diverse audience including researchers, teachers, and students. The investigation and presentation of Murray’s works from his early career to

later years provide a historical account that highlights significant milestones in his career, illustrating the evolution of his ideas and practices as a reformer, as well as the transformative impact of his contributions to writing pedagogy. It serves as a valuable resource for composition researchers by providing them with in-depth insights into Murray's theories and methodologies. Teachers and educators can use the book to enhance their pedagogy and course design to empower their students to express their own voices. Furthermore, this book can benefit graduate students, especially international graduate students like myself, by engaging them with the textual chronicle of a reformer who remains highly relevant in discussions of writerly voice and writing course design, thereby assisting in their preparation for teaching assistantships.

Works Cited

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