

**Ayres, Ruth, and Christi Overman. *Celebrating Writers: From Possibilities Through Publication*. Portland: Stenhouse, 2013. 90 pages. \$13.68. 978 1 57110 9507. Print.**

Reviewed by Elizabeth B. Jamison

Writing can be an arduous process for students and for all writers. The authors of *Celebrating Writers: From Possibilities through Publication (Celebrating Writers)*, focus their short but inspirational text on guiding students and teachers through the process of writing with celebratory steps that make the “process” less painful. Ruth Ayres, full time writing coach for the Wawasee School District and creator of the progressive blog “Ruth Ayres Writes,” asserts that when teachers take the importance off the end-product, “personalize the writing process,” and make time to celebrate the many aspects of writing, student writers will become more comfortable with their own writing and will turn in superior, authentic work (5).

Ayres earned her Bachelor’s degree in Secondary Education with a major in Biology and Chemistry and a minor in English with a middle school endorsement. She holds a Master’s in School Administration from Northern Indiana University. Elementary teacher Christi Overman assisted Ayres with the text, published in 2013. Although writers of all ages and levels could certainly benefit by celebrating the small steps in process writing, *Celebrating Writers* is written primarily for teachers of elementary and middle school students.

In the first chapter titled, “Expanding Writing Celebrations,” Ayres and Overman introduce an important distinction between publication and celebration, stating that “celebration is part of the life of a writer” and “publication is part of the writing process” (5). This distinction is my favorite aspect of the book. Unfortunately, writers of all ages spend countless hours worrying about an eventual grade, or possible rejection letter, and they forget to enjoy the actual creative process of writing.

Additionally, Chapter 1 offers some useful “celebration messages” that, while seeming a bit unrealistic for professional or advanced writers, will likely elicit hope and confidence in younger audiences:

- The writer is more important than the writing.
- Writers celebrate throughout the writing process.
- Learning, growing writers are the goal.
- Personalizing the writing process is important to writers.
- Everyone has a story to share. (6-7)

The authors explain that through three aspects of celebration (response, reflection, and rejoicing) writers and teachers will hopefully see that “the point of learning to be a writer isn’t to become famous. The purpose of being a writer is to communicate clearly, come to new understandings, and connect with others” (7). Ayres and Overman aptly define what writing should be; and if more educators were to convey their message of celebration in the classroom, I believe that the youth of today would turn into the writers of tomorrow.

Chapter 2 expands on the authors’ three elements of celebration—response, reflection, and rejoicing—with creative charts and handouts designed to spark many opportunities for celebration during writing. They continue to use effective anecdotes to describe each concept and are careful to make allowances in their visual aids for older students.

I do, however, have one concern regarding their philosophy towards peer response and grouping. The authors explain that they rarely “let writing experience levels determine partnerships” and that “often the most inexperienced writers in the room give the most meaningful feedback” (21). Studies ranging from Jean Reiss’ 1960 AP Conference paper on “The Future of AP Administration” to the National Association for Gifted Children show that pairing an inexperienced writer with an accomplished

writer might not be the best strategy to prepare students for a rigorous curriculum. And, what about gifted students? According to the National Association for Gifted Children, “Strong research evidence supports the effectiveness of ability grouping for gifted students in accelerated classes, enrichment programs, [and] advanced placement programs” (NAGC Position Statement: Ability Grouping). I believe it counterproductive to place less experienced writers with more advanced or gifted students (even at the elementary level). The student who is less skilled will not have the vocabulary and understanding of complex writing solutions that the more experienced writer needs. Gifted writers may miss an opportunity to learn new material and gain insight from complex ideas and strategies.

Not to imply that inexperienced writers cannot offer useful feedback; on the contrary, new writers often add a fresh perspective to topics. However, experienced writers need advanced feedback beyond the skillset of those who have lower writing ability. I have experienced this repeatedly in my own classroom. When inexperienced writers are paired with those of proven performance, the feedback is usually limited to “that was very good!” simply because they do not recognize complex issues inherent in effective writing.

In subsequent paragraphs, the authors advise teachers to look at a variety of information [they] have about their students, and to ultimately depend on [their] gut to [assign] writing partners” (21). Teachers recognize that although they may teach the same subject to different classes, the dynamics in each class will always differ. Thus, flexibility in teaching methods, pacing, and grouping is key to a successful semester and essential for an effective writing workshop. I appreciate that although Ayres and Overman do not prefer ability grouping, they understand the need for flexibility based on classroom dynamics.

Ayres and Overman win praise for spending time on the subject of pairing and grouping, which is rarely discussed in elementary, secondary, and advanced composition texts. For instance, in the textbook *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical*

*Reader and Guide*, the authors mention the importance of peer editing with “friends,” (Kirsznner and Mandell 55), but they fail to discuss strategies for grouping students with the most *effective* peer editor. In *The Language of Composition*, the authors outline the elements of the writing process but fall short when expanding on the dynamics of effective grouping. That Ayres and Overman highlight this issue in the chapter shows their emphasis on the entire process of writing, from beginning to end.

Chapter 3, “Expanding Celebrations Online” will be helpful to teachers who are new to social media and its use in the classroom; however, it will be a bit redundant for those who are familiar with social media, blogging, and the Internet. Although the authors limit their Internet platforms to the Basic Six: Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Skype, YouTube, and Pinterest, that they devote a chapter to online writing is commendable and much needed as teachers seek to employ today’s technologies as sites for engaging students in writing. Ayres and Overman’s lessons also comply with the technology requirements in the Nation’s Common Core Standards, which expect teachers to use technology in the classroom by having students incorporate computers, the Internet, and multi-media programs into writing projects.

Pedagogy on computers and writing—from Cynthia Selfe and continuing with current studies including Denise Johnson’s essay, “Teaching With Authors’ Blogs: Connections, Collaboration, Creativity,” Tzu-Chao Chian’s study, “A Blog-Based Peer Assessment Model to Support Pupils’ Composition Activity,” Shelbie Witt’s Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy project, “That’s Online Writing, Not Boring School Writing’: Writing With Blogs and the Talkback Project”—has been in the forefront of composition studies in universities since the early 1990’s. Although the lessons in this chapter are not original or new, they are engaging, and *Celebrating Writers* is well-timed. While the university system has embraced technology in the classroom, our public education system (K-12) has taken longer to integrate technology into everyday curricula.

From the early 2000's to around 2010, teachers embraced using technology in the classroom, delivering classroom notes or lessons to students via a PowerPoint or utilizing multi-media presentations. They mistakenly believed that since they were using technologies to deliver their lessons they were meeting the requirements of the standards. They did not realize that the standards required students to use technology as well. And yet, many teachers still shy away from online collaborative writing; but as Ayres and Overman demonstrate, a plethora of opportunities exist to celebrate writing online. Often, students enjoy the freedom and safety of writing in an online forum.

One useful message presented in the chapter will resonate with elementary teachers who can “model and discuss powerful and responsible ways [that children] use their voices online” (40). As a parent of a fifth-grader and a teacher of high school students, I see this need for Internet responsibility every day. As students become more involved with virtual communities, they require constant reminders about online safety, etiquette, and privacy. The authors assert that students need to learn about “creating online spaces” and “concise writing in Twitter” as well as in other social media networks. Again, they couldn't be more correct. A powerful way for students to learn the tenets of the rhetorical triangle and Aristotle's ethos, logos, and pathos is through social media. The authors include lessons in their text that teach students how to craft compelling statements or arguments in 140 characters or fewer (Twitter allows 140 characters per Tweet) and that show students how to customize their own “online space” according to their personality. This reviewer believes it is a perfect way to enter into the world of online writing with rhetorical purpose.

Ayres and Overman also provide teachers with learned advice when they stress the importance of preparing a classroom's online environment. They urge teachers to take the time necessary to envision a classroom's potential online space, to identify the specific purpose for each online platform, and they provide several

useful charts and visuals designed to keep teachers organized, students prepared, and parents informed.

Chapter 4, titled “Formal Celebrations,” revolves around the primary claim that when students know there will be a celebration and that others will read their work, the writing will naturally improve. What I appreciate most about this chapter is the idea that “audience matters— both the community of writers within our classroom walls and the audience beyond the classroom” (54). The sooner students learn how to write with a specific audience in mind, the better. The authors also use audience to discuss celebrations when they write that “formal celebrations provide an opportunity for us to share our very best work with an audience” (54). In carefully choosing an audience, writers experience the joy of others who appreciate their work and who will give them genuine feedback.

Continuing in Chapters 4 and then in Chapter 5, Ayres and Overman offer a variety of ways that teachers, students and writers can connect and celebrate as a community— in both formal and informal settings. In Chapter 5, “Forty Formal Celebration Ideas,” the authors provide teachers with last-minute plans as well as long-term ideas for celebrating during writing. I enjoyed this chapter and will employ several of the strategies in my own composition courses. Each of the three informative sections in the chapter contains some fantastic, workable ideas that I am confident teachers and students will appreciate. A partial listing of my favorite lesson ideas include the following:

- **Poetry Jam:** Students bring a poem to class, sit in a circle, and read aloud. One person starts, and then the next person to read must link an idea in his or her poem to an idea or concept in the previous one (69).
- **Silent Celebration:** Students display their writing and a response sheet, and their peers move from place to place and write a response on the card (68).

- **Placemats:** Students transfer their favorite family memories onto placements using construction paper and illustrations. They then laminate their work, creating a durable, useful story to share with their family (73).
- **Writing as Gifts:** Students brainstorm all the creative ways they can turn their writing into gifts for family and friends (78).
- **Film Festival:** Students transfer their “screenplay” into a movie using a moviemaker program. This is a fun way to share talent and watch movies together. The authors suggest hosting two screenings, one during the day for students, and the other at night for parents (83).
- **Slice of Life Blogging:** Blogging is always a fantastic way to encourage students to love writing again, and this activity offers students an avenue to connect with other bloggers throughout the world (83).

*Celebrating Writers* is a quick and easy read that reminds teachers to encourage students to slow down and embrace each step in their writing process. Elementary teachers will love the fun strategies and the many charts, handouts, and easy-to-adapt lessons included throughout the text.

For additional resources and inspirational activities, visit Ruth Ayres’ blog. Ayres practices what she preaches with her own online community “Celebrate This Week,” which is housed on her acclaimed blog “Ruth Ayers Writes.com.” I have visited the blog and it delivers on the promise of celebration, community, collaboration, and hope—something that all writers will appreciate.

Finally, if the primary goal of her text is to inspire both teachers and students to engage in an authentic writing process, then this writer believes that the book achieves its main objective.

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