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## Running ahead: Go be a writer! Book review

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Kuby, C., & Rucker, T. G. (2016). *Go be a writer! Expanding the curricular boundaries of literacy learning with children*. New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press.

The goal of this book is to provide teachers and researchers with a departure from the expected way to look at ‘knowing/ being/ doing’<sup>1</sup> literacy. This is achieved through presenting a picture of how humans and non-humans, such as time, space, materials and nature, interact to produce texts; that is how these components of literacy instruction play equal parts in learning, and how they become “entangled in producing reality(ies) and newness” (Kuby & Crawford, 2018). Through a well-developed researcher-teacher partnership, Candace Kuby, the researcher, and Tara Gutshall Rucker, the teacher, worked together in Tara’s classroom, Room 203. They created a multimodal ‘writer’s studio’, where

students were encouraged to use physical materials to create their projects.

The book has nine chapters. The first three chapters focus on the theory grounding Candace and Tara’s research on writing instruction. The authors provide a thorough and in-depth description and rationale for using poststructural and posthumanist theories, aligning them with eight specific concepts, which are clearly described in the book: rhizomes and lines of flight, assemblages of desire, smooth versus striated spaces, absent presence, becoming, enacted agency, intra-activity with materials, and entanglement.



These eight concepts and the theoretical framework merge together to explain the focus of the book: how they followed and encouraged students' literacy desires. These literacy desires are wants/interests/curiosities identified by students that might be pre-planned, or just happen organically as students work with various materials in the writing class. The students in Room 203 were given the opportunity to discover and explore these desires. Chapter Three examines Candace' and Tara's use of space, time, materials, language, and trust and permission, and prepares the reader to explore samples of Tara's students' literacy 'desirings', which, according to the authors, signifies moments and intra-actions of students with materials/space/time.

Chapters Four through Eight focus on the writing projects that developed in Room 203. The data were collected over a few years, in Tara's grade-one and grade-two classrooms. Each chapter looks at a different genre, including daily student-led mini-lessons, non-fiction writing, personal narratives, series writing, and what I would refer to as the 'other events'. These 'other events' represent activities that the students explored, nascent from a less

traditional 'writer's studio' model. They were projects that developed by encouraging students to follow their literacy desires; Candace and Tara explained that, in most other traditional classrooms, these projects "would have been squelched or the students told they could not be this type of learner at school" (p. 160).

The goal of chapters Four through Eight was to document the process of the literacy concept of students 'becoming' – how the student(s) came to realise their desire. Through entangled intra-actions with materials, time, technology, writing tools, and the smooth space cultivated in Room 203, the students created new lines of flight, and Candace and Tara provided a new way to look at what literacy and writing can be. A noteworthy detail was that the focus of the analysis of the students' literacy desiring was never the final product, but rather the process the students engaged in to reach and explore their desires. The authors clearly state on multiple occasions that the purpose of this book and the analysis was not to present their own interpretation of the students' work, but rather to describe what happened in Room 203, and allow the reader



to analyze, explore and interpret the process and outcomes through their own professional and personal experiences.

The book is nicely tied together in Chapter Nine, with a brief summary, a short section on the relationship between the Common Core State standards (CCSS) and the writing instruction in Room 203, and final thoughts shared between Candace and Tara.

The structure and writing style of this book are rather unique. The authors use multiple modes to communicate their ideas. They use images and different fonts and symbols to represent different meanings when exploring student conversations and written work. Additionally, throughout the book, Candace and Tara write using different voices, sometimes resembling a conversation, and other times, paralleling a personal journal entry.

As an experienced teacher and current PhD candidate researching how to improve the writing performance of young children, I was intrigued by the title and abstract of the book, as well as the fact that it is the fruit of collaboration between a researcher

and an in-service teacher. The book was engaging, thoughtful, personal and easy to read. Nevertheless, and even though the stated intention of the book was only to describe the literacy projects of their students, the authors did not address certain writing instruction elements. For example, when were the students taught how to write? Did Tara ever lead mini-lessons? Although Tara did conference with the students, was this adequate enough to teach children in grade one and two the foundational tools of writing? A baseline and some measuring instruments would have been beneficial to evaluate the impact on student's literacy skills of this multi-modal approach to teaching writing. Furthermore, a follow-up on the students' progress in Room 203 would have helped evaluate the lasting impressions of this program in subsequent elementary school years.

This book's unique look at writing instruction is a read I would recommend for elementary pre- and in-service teachers, administrators and university professors, to encourage questioning some of the instructional techniques currently used in classrooms, and will hopefully open teachers and students up to new



and meaningful literacy experiences. It allows educators to imagine new ways of thinking, teaching and researching about writing in schools, and may be a valuable resource for those seeking a new approach to teaching writing.

I see great value in the role unscripted intra-actions play in increasing engagement in learning. Multimodal

literacy, the departure from the expected, intra-activity with non-human elements, and the notion of ‘desiring’ and ‘becoming’ are worthwhile concepts to explore and implement in a literacy classroom, but I do not believe that these practices should be a replacement to a semi-structured approach to building foundational skills in literacy.

## ***Endnotes***

*1 This is an expression that Kuby uses to describe literacy instruction.*

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