Book Study Questions
Holding on to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones

Chapter 1: The Curse of Graphite
Chapter 2: The Teacher as Schmidt

1. What examples of "mechanization" do you see in your own school or school district?

2. We often hear that teachers need to "be on the same page" because students move from school to school. What is the right balance of consistency and individual teacher initiative? Do you feel your school has the right balance?

3. There is a big push now for "evidence-based instruction," which gives a decisive role to educational research. How important is research to your teaching? How do research results play out in your teaching? Or do they?

4. How do tests shape what you teach? Do they cause you to eliminate features of literacy instruction you feel are important? How might you argue for those things that are being left out?

5. In this chapter I coin (or I think I coin) the term "micro-theories"—to describe the fine-grained judgments teachers make about students. My point was to open up all of the thinking-in-context that a teacher must do. Can you apply this term to your own decision making? Pick an hour of teaching and itemize the number of judgments you make.

6. What do you feel is the role of a principal in fostering effective literacy instruction? How can administers avoid a panicky, reactive approach to test scores? How should administrators approach teachers reluctant to change or question anything.

Chapter 3: Balance the Basics

1. In chapter 3, I argue that reading dominates writing—and really always has in American schools. Writing gets shoved to the side for a variety of reasons, even though it is considered a coequal skill by most employers. Do you find this to be true? And if so, why is writing marginalized?

2. There is still the general view that a teacher's job is to mark all errors—even though it is doubtful that this accomplishes much beyond creating a huge and unpleasant role for the teacher. What alternatives for dealing with correction can you imagine?

3. In your school, how well is writing integrated into the subject areas? To what extent do teachers of other subjects see their job as teaching "content" and not writing? What excellent examples of content-area writing exist in your school?

4. I argue in this chapter that we live in a "documentary society," where virtually all positions require writing. As a project, can you have students explore the kinds of writing adults do in the workplace? What skills do they find most important?

Chapter 4: Expressive Writing

1. Think about your own writing process. When do you feel fluent and natural in your writing? When do you feel blocked and hesitant? Based on your own experience, what conditions enable you to write? How can we ensure that students get the same opportunities?

2. What is the role of required forms—like the 5-paragraph format—in learning to write? What does it enable? What does it inhibit? What other formats should students be aware of?

3. One problem students have with expository writing and argumentation is that they haven't read a lot of it. I always argue that you can't hit a target that you have never seen. How can you build in frequent experiences where students read op-ed pieces, editorials, blogs, etc?

4. How can we ask students to do more informal, free writing in class (maybe on a prompt from the teacher) without creating a huge paper load?

5. Should the literature criticism paper be the primary form in high school English classes? It is not a form that students read—nor that many adults read. Are there other forms of writing about literature that may seem more real to students—e.g. evaluating more recent books and justifying those evaluations? This is a common form on the Internet for evaluating everything from recipes to novels.

Chapter 5: Popular Culture as a Literacy Tool
Chapter 6: Literacy and Pleasure

1. Many of us “became readers” not by reading great literature but by reading some popular series. Free write for 10 minutes on how you became a reader and what books were crucial.

2. One popular way of teaching literature is the historical survey. There is a logic to this approach, showing the development of literature, but there is a huge drawback: you start with the work that is most remote from the student and work toward work that is closer to his or her experience. And often courses don’t really get to the present. So the question is—should surveys be taught backwards, working the present to the past?

3. One of the goals of reading instruction is to help student enter what I call the “reading state” or that Nancie Atwell calls “the reading zone.” What is it like for you to enter the reading zone? Can your students describe this total immersion into reading? What do they find “unpleasurable” in reading?

4. According to a recent study of media use, children and young adults in this country average 8 hrs. 33 minutes of media exposure a day, often multitasking. How can schools capitalize on some of this media interest in promoting literacy instruction? To what extent can some of these media narratives provide scaffolds or materials for students to write stories, plays, reviews, etc? What value is there in being aware of these media affiliations?

5. Statistics show that voluntary reading begins to drop off in middle school and that all of the “gains” in elementary school reading dissipate. Is this an inevitable result of the larger social life of middle school students? Or does it reflect a “fun-is-over” approach to reading that may begin in middle school?

Chapter 7: Uncluttering the Curriculum

1. Look over your own state standards for reading and writing—or perhaps your own school or district curriculum. Do they seem cluttered to you? If you were to highlight to most important standards what would they be?

2. To what extend do textbooks and purchased systems define the curriculum of your school? What do you find useful in these systems? What do you find restrictive or inappropriate? How flexibly can you use these systems?

3. I had originally titled this chapter “A Curriculum You Could Write on an Envelope.” The idea was to define curricular goals in an economical way. Get an envelope and write your reading and writing goals on one side—share them with your partners. I suspect that these are your own “ideas worth fighting for.”

4. How is your curriculum determined? Who selects materials? What pressure do you feel to buy "evidenced-based" programs? Is the perspective of classroom teachers adequately reflected in these decisions? Are the best teachers limited by these decisions?

Chapter 8: Silences in Our Teaching Stories

1. When you read accounts of great teaching, does it ever make you feel inadequate—that you could never be that teacher? What is the value of "great teacher" stories?

2. How frequently have you had a chance to watch another teacher teach? How can you work with your administrators to use subs so that this kind of observation is part of ongoing professional development? What things have you learned from watching another teacher?

3. In this chapter, I argue for "thinking small." What small change has worked for you recently? What small success can you celebrate?

4. A number of people claim that failures are invaluable because we learn from them. This is often easier said than done because failure can bring up feelings of inadequacy. How does your own school help new teachers process failure? How do you go beyond the emotional reaction so that you can make failure instructive?

Chapter 9: Free Reading

1. The evidence suggests that free reading declines as students enter middle school and virtually disappears in high school. Yet when interviewed students at all ages express a desire to choose their own reading. How do we account for the decline in chosen reading? What curricular changes would be necessary to build it in?

2. Penny Kittle, author of *Write Beside Them*, interviewed her high school senior students to ask whether they actually read the assigned books in their literature classes. She found that even good students routinely faked it, used Spark Notes, wrote papers based on class discussion, etc. Do you feel this is a common pattern among high school students in your school or district? If so, what does this indicate about assigned reading?