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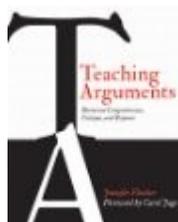
Teaching Arguments: Rhetorical Comprehension, Critique, and Response

reviewed by Sarah M. Fleming – September 14, 2015

Title: Teaching Arguments: Rhetorical Comprehension, Critique, and Response
Author(s): Jennifer Fletcher
Publisher:

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In response to sweeping curriculum re-design prompted by the Common Core State Standards (CCSSO, 2010), today's high school English teachers are in search of texts to help them shift from programs dominated by literary analysis to ones well-versed in rhetorical analysis, in which teachers instruct students to read and write arguments using a rhetorical approach. Jennifer Fletcher's new book, *Teaching Arguments: Rhetorical Comprehension, Critique, and Response*, gives English teachers unfamiliar with the classical tradition of rhetorical strategies a manageable yet thorough introduction to teaching and learning for argumentation.

The book's introduction instructs readers to embrace teaching the reading and writing of argument as "threshold concepts." These concepts describe learning that moves students to new and more sophisticated levels of understanding—those "aha" moments that "mark both a major stumbling block and point of no return in learning since successfully passing through the portal depends on learning to think differently, even counterintuitively" (p. xiv). This is followed by a careful presentation and extensive modeling of rhetorical analyses, using prompts from Fletcher's own teaching and her students' sample work as well as pulling from texts as

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About the Author

- Sarah Fleming
Syracuse University
E-mail Author
SARAH M. FLEMING is a doctoral student in English Education at Syracuse University who has been teaching high school English for fifteen years. Her research interests include practitioner inquiry, youth participatory action research, critical literacy and young adult literature. Ms. Fleming recently reviewed *Service-learning in Literacy Education: Possibilities for Teaching and Learning* (Kinloch & Smagorinsky, Eds, 2013) for the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. Currently Ms. Fleming is conducting her dissertation research on using an inquiry approach to teaching and learning with high school students for their research assignments.

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diverse as Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, opinion pieces from *The New York Times*, Calvin & Hobbes comic strips, and songs from rap/hip-hop artists such as Macklemore and Eminem. Each chapter concludes with a list of points to remember and prompts for quick-writes or conversations, making the text ideal for future reference and fostering conversation among colleagues.

The first two chapters ask the practicing English teacher to consider what must happen when reading a text rhetorically. In Chapter One, *Starting with Open-Minded Inquiry*, Fletcher invites teachers and students to enter the conversation between writers and readers by carefully listening to and observing the text, to pay attention (p. 2). Fletcher models Peter Elbow's believing game when reading David Brooks' op-ed piece "The Olympic Contradiction" from *The New York Times* (2012). In so doing, she demonstrates how students can read critically yet supportively, or "read with the grain" (p. 15).

In Chapter Two, *From Comprehension to Critique*, Fletcher takes the reader through the same Brooks' article, this time playing the doubting game in which they resist and question the writer's authority. Calling upon familiar heuristics such as the PAPA square (purpose, audience, persona, and argument) and the rhetorical précis, Fletcher explains that "students who can identify not only what a text says, but also what it does (the how) and to what end (the why) have developed the sophisticated literacy and inquiry practices that are the hallmarks of postsecondary success" (p. 48). These chapters work together to demonstrate how students must "move beyond believing and doubting to discovering their own stance on an issue" (p. 40) in order to transform their understanding and ready themselves for developing a defensible assertion.

Chapters Three through Five break down the major components of the rhetorical situation and address each as a learning threshold. According to Fletcher, teachers must be *Fostering a Deeper Understanding of the Occasion* (Chapter Three), of *Audience* (Chapter Four), and of *Purpose* (Chapter Five). While she addresses familiar models such as the SOAPS (speaker, occasion, audience, purpose, and subject) approach to understanding an argument's rhetorical situation, Fletcher goes further to address more complex concepts. In her discussion of occasion, Fletcher explores the concepts of exigency, Kairos, and

stasis theory. Her treatment of students' understanding of audience warns against the dangers of responding to texts without greater knowledge of their original context—publication and its readership. Having a deeper understanding of purpose means being able to distinguish between deliberative, forensic, and epideictic rhetoric, and Fletcher leads students to see when writers have multiple purposes.

In each of these chapters, Fletcher demonstrates how this knowledge can be applied to improve student writing. Fletcher asks students to examine their writing for lost opportunities (less effective choices, such as overly general hooks like “throughout history . . . ” or “since the dawn of time . . . ”) that could re-allocate precious space and word count for more precise treatment of the rhetorical situation (p. 71). Fletcher also suggests that students prepare their own writing using circles of intimacy to identify and account for various levels of audience (p. 89), reminding them that “writing for an audience means it’s not just about how you write; it’s about how your audience reads” (p. 93). To have students practice their understanding of purpose, Fletcher asks them to write a preface to their essay draft much like an author writes a preface to the reader, identifying their decisions and explaining how those decisions reflected their intended purpose (p. 130).

Chapter Six, Analyzing and Integrating Ethos, Pathos, and Logos, provides readers with clarification of the three appeals, simultaneously demystifying these concepts while honoring their nuanced meanings and complexity, especially when working in concert with a writer’s command. Fletcher takes her readers through multiple exercises, asking students to analyze instances in which writers used ethos, pathos, and logos, such as how to create an academic ethos for themselves (p. 150) or how to make use of their logic radar (p. 158). Specific to logos, Fletcher addresses challenging concepts with which students struggle, such as qualifying claims, responding to counterarguments with concessions, examining assumptions and warrants, and avoiding logical fallacies.

Fletcher mentions that her book can be read non-sequentially. Chapter Seven, Aristotle’s Guide to Becoming a “Good” Student, can and perhaps should be read earlier if the teacher doubts the extent to which Fletcher’s suggestions can be applied to all high school students. Citing Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow and Plato’s description of writing as “a type

of divine madness in which the self is carried away by a higher power” (p. 193-95), Fletcher argues for the establishment of “engaged, literate lifestyles” that demonstrate the habits of mind and body reminiscent of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. After all, “from Aristotle’s perspective, how we think and how we live are two sides of the same coin” (p. 181).

Fletcher models good writing by making use of the same rhetorical strategies she advocates to her readers. She takes her audience seriously and addresses practicing English teachers respectfully and inclusively, a quality often lacking in literature for the practitioner. I appreciated that Fletcher chose to include explanations about the classical tradition of rhetoric, as well as many references to other texts about writing and reading arguments. I also greatly appreciated the attention she paid to the clear connection between argumentation and the Common Core State Standards without apology or argument as to their place in the curriculum, but rather in pragmatic recognition of their role in the shifting landscape of English Language Arts.

I would recommend *Teaching Arguments: Rhetorical Comprehension, Critique, and Response* to any secondary English teacher, even those working with middle school-aged students, as the techniques Fletcher employs can be used with students of most ages. I would suggest that teachers, especially those with less experience in teaching argumentation, read this book in professional groups so they might benefit from the conversation it will inevitably inspire.

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