

Teaching Arguments: Rhetorical Comprehension, Critique, and Response, by Jennifer Fletcher. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2015. 264 pp.

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Jennifer Fletcher's *Teaching Arguments: Rhetorical Comprehension, Critique, and Response* is intended to empower its audience—high school language arts teachers and those who train them—to help students develop a distinctly rhetorical perspective on reading and writing arguments. Rhetorical training, she argues, provides the essential tools for understanding and composing texts, or, in Kenneth Burke's terms, "equipment for living." It is no wonder, therefore, that Fletcher, building on the work of Jan Meyer and Ray Land and a growing number of composition scholars, characterizes key rhetorical ideas as "threshold concepts" that constitute not merely one more set of literacy skills, but a dynamic way of being and acting in the world.

Fletcher's Introduction, "Crossing the Threshold," makes the general case for teaching language arts rhetorically and fleshes out "threshold concepts" of argumentation. She declares, "This book is about opening doors for deeper learning for all our students through a rhetorical approach to arguments—an approach based on situational awareness and responsiveness instead of rules and formulas" (xiv). Chapter one, "Starting with Open-Minded Inquiry," employs Peter Elbow's concept of "the believing game" to explore the pedagogical value of reading arguments on their own terms (Elbow 147–91). Chapter two, "From Comprehension to Critique," complements the previous chapter by presenting reading against the grain via Elbow's "doubting game" (Elbow 147–91). Fletcher explains that applying both of Elbow's orientations to reading assists students in discovering their own positions on the issues at hand. "Fostering a Deeper Understanding of the Occasion," Fletcher's third chapter, features the rhetorical situation in which an argument is embedded. Building on issues of context, chapter four, "Fostering a Deeper Sense of Audience," focuses specifically on the interplay of values, assumptions, and beliefs between the text and its audience. "Fostering a Deeper Understanding of Purpose," chapter five, features Aristotle's deliberative, forensic, and epideictic genres of rhetoric as a way of discussing the rhetor's motivation. Chapter six, "Analyzing and Integrating Ethos, Pathos, and Logos," which to my mind forms the heart of the book, presents a useful approach to argumentation based on Aristotle's triune appeals and other concepts, including Toulmin's famous model. (This material is so important that I recommend reading it between chapters two and three, rather than in the order Fletcher places it.)

Fletcher has designed *Teaching Arguments* as a gateway to college and career readiness for students, particularly those from the lower reaches of the socio-economic spectrum. Facility in rhetoric, she urges, is a key step in the journey toward college, meaningful work, and informed citizenship, which makes the subject at hand all the more important for students who do not benefit from privilege. Nowhere is her motivation to equip students who struggle with the “next steps” after high school more evident than in her final chapter: “Aristotle’s Guide to Becoming a ‘Good’ Student.” Here, Fletcher provides specific methods for helping such students imagine and effect success.

One of the most notable characteristics of *Teaching Arguments* is Fletcher’s decision to build on the rhetorical learning of the ancients. She draws most heavily on Aristotle, particularly his *Rhetoric*, but she also enriches her discussion of student success by drawing on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a less obvious, but inventive source. *Phaedrus*, Plato’s best-known dialogue concerning rhetoric, is insightfully featured, as are the ancient rhetorical concepts of *kairos*, *decorum*, the common topics (or *topoi*), and stasis. For the most part, her reliance on classical rhetoric is welcome, for it grounds contemporary reading and writing instruction in the long tradition of humane learning. Cultural differences aside, the classical terminology Fletcher introduces has great explanatory power and remarkable transferability.

Furthermore, Fletcher conscientiously articulates her pedagogical program of rhetorical education with current trends in language arts instruction, most significantly the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). She convincingly demonstrates that the widely adopted national pedagogy invites a rigorously rhetorical approach to high school language arts instruction. Fletcher’s links to the CCSS demonstrate the value of the rhetorical approach to reading and writing instruction to those with a strong interest in the CCSS and, alternatively, suggests the value of the CCSS to those heavily invested in rhetorical education. It is important to note, however, that although *Teaching Arguments* operates comfortably *within* the structure of the CCSS, it is not truly *of* the CCSS. Fletcher makes her own way, emphasizing links to Common Core anchor standards and grade-specific standards when they make sense, but not slavishly. For teachers operating beyond the boundaries of the CCSS, the pedagogical advice offered here is sufficiently general and portable to remain relevant. A similar line of argument could be made about *Teaching Arguments’* links to developments in California’s public school system, in which Fletcher has served as a high school teacher and a California State University professor. The book frequently references California’s rhetorical Expository Reading and Writing Course and the California State University’s English Placement Test, which are both germane to California teachers and their students. Nonetheless,

one need not have ties to California's educational system to benefit from the book's overall pedagogical program.

In addition to providing high school language arts teachers with a distinctly rhetorical perspective grounded in both ancient and twenty-first-century pedagogy, Fletcher expertly blends theory and application. For every set of terms or concepts introduced, she provides specific exercises that can be directly incorporated into the classroom. In many cases, she reproduces students' responses to featured activities that render the process of rhetorical education all the more concrete. In addition to these activities and responses, Fletcher concludes each chapter with a generous list of "Prompts for Quick-Writes or Pairs Conversations"; and, over the course of the book, she includes seven argumentative essay prompts and four readings. (She also features a compilation of the principal readings and exercises as twenty-five appendices.)

Fletcher's skillful combination of the abstract and the concrete calls to mind an additional act of blending that significantly enhances *Teaching Arguments*—namely, her inclusion both of K–12 and university-level pedagogy and scholarship. Thus, on the one hand, the book's foreword is produced by Carol Jago, longtime California high school teacher, and Fletcher draws upon many others who contribute to K–12 pedagogy: scholars such as George Hillocks and Kelly Gallagher, as well as many practicing high school teachers. On the other hand, she features rhetoricians better known in university circles such as Kenneth Burke, Charles Bazerman, and Carolyn Miller, as well as prominent college textbooks such as Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, John Gage's *The Shape of Reason: Argumentative Writing in College*, and the contributions of Peter Elbow. And several of her influences, such as Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *"They Say/I Say": The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, operate in both realms. Through this blend of high school and college scholarly and pedagogical traditions, Fletcher demonstrates that the differences between K–12 and college pedagogy should not be viewed as a matter of kind, but of degree.

My concerns about *Teaching Arguments* fall within the realm of minor limitations—for no book can do all things for all people. Fletcher's treatment of support for claims (Toulmin's concept of data or Aristotle's minor premise for an enthymeme) seems rather narrowly focused on "evidence" (information, statistics, and so forth), whereas in the larger historical discussion of argumentation, support is conceptualized more broadly in terms of reasons and reason-giving. The data or minor premise, in effect, answers the question "why?" by forming the "because clause" for the thesis. Supplementing *Teaching Arguments* with something like Gage's discussion of supporting arguments in *The Shape of Reason* (chapter six, "Giving Reasons") may be a useful workaround here. Furthermore, I would have appreciated a more precise handling of the

term “purpose,” which varies in meaning throughout the book, from claim or central argument, to motive (in contrast with the argument), to something like generic goal. My final concern is Fletcher’s rather vague use of the term “essay” to describe most of the writing assignments introduced in the book. Given her commitment to providing very concrete applications and exercises for learning rhetorical concepts, it would be a relatively easy matter to render in more precise terms the generic and rhetorical expectations for the papers she discusses. This increased specificity is particularly important given the growing importance of genre awareness in composition studies.

These minor quibbles aside, I wish to conclude by praising what is perhaps the defining feature of *Teaching Arguments*, Fletcher’s highly persuasive teacherly *ethos*. Throughout the book, she models for her reader the public persona of a knowledgeable, principled, caring instructor of rhetoric who both explains and exemplifies the principal elements of Aristotle’s notion of rhetorical character: *phronesis*, *arête*, and goodwill. Thus, *Teaching Arguments* epitomizes Aristotle’s ancient assertion that “character is almost, so to speak, the controlling factor in persuasion” (38). I heartily recommend this book for K–12 language arts educators—and those who prepare them—drawn to the ranks of that ancient, civic-minded profession: the teacher of rhetoric.

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Works Cited

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