**Teaching Arguments: Rhetorical Comprehension, Critique, and Response**
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Most people see arguments as a “he said, she said” or as a back-and-forth match that has no apparent winner at the end. This nonsensical bickering solves nothing. Arguing to get your point across and persuade your audience to view the issue your way can be a sticky situation that turns ugly quickly. Many people do not know how to argue with critical thought, nor do they know how to use persuasive techniques in a way that will eliminate negativity, frustration, and insult. For this reason, teaching adolescents how to comprehend, analyze, and respond to arguments is one of the most essential skills teachers can give to their students.

In *Teaching Arguments*, Jennifer Fletcher provides language arts teachers with engaging activities, graphic organizers, writing prompts, and much more to help students read, write, think, speak, and listen rhetorically. She says, “If we want our students to do more than just point and shoot when it comes to argumentation, we need to teach them what rhetoric is and does. Rhetorical reading and writing are the gateway practices behind effective argumentation” (xiv). Fletcher offers teachers approaches to helping students gain deeper learning through a rhetorical approach.

**Why Is Rhetoric Important?**

Fletcher writes, “Rhetoric—in addition to being versatile—has always been both eminently rigorous and practical. Throughout centuries, rhetoric has been a remarkably adaptive means to prepare critical thinkers and effective communicators for real-world decisions” (xv). Being able to spot faulty reasoning, carry on a logical conversation, be persuasive, and maneuver through a diverse society are skills everyone should have. However, finding ways to differentiate this higher-level skill for less mature and less experienced readers and writers is the challenge. This is where *Teaching Arguments* becomes the teaching tool that guides educators and supports their students’ learning.

Fletcher notes that a rhetorical approach to texts and academic argument acknowledges that writing begins with reading, and she suggests that students start with what she calls the open mind theory. “Starting with open-minded inquiry means starting by finding the questions other writers are asking” (2). She maintains that it is the students’ job to find the “hot topics” through reading and analysis of different texts.

Among other strategies, Fletcher offers quick-write prompts, graphic organizers, and work samples to enable teachers to engage students in critical thinking and writing. In *Teaching Arguments*, Jennifer Fletcher provides language arts teachers with engaging activities, graphic organizers, writing prompts, and much more to help students read, write, think, speak, and listen rhetorically. She says, “If we want our students to do more than just point and shoot when it comes to argumentation, we need to teach them what rhetoric is and does. Rhetorical reading and writing are the gateway practices behind effective argumentation” (xiv). Fletcher offers teachers approaches to helping students gain deeper learning through a rhetorical approach.

Ken Lindblom, Column Editor

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students to respond to real-world arguments.

Fletcher’s book includes chapters dedicated to fostering a deeper understanding of occasion, purpose, and audience. She writes, “Knowing the when, where, who, and why of an argument allows students to enter academic conversations with skill and confidence” (53). Some students, especially those who are inexperienced writers, have difficulty identifying these elements, and they struggle applying it to their own writing.

Another concept Fletcher spends a great deal of time on is Kairos. She explains this as “the immediate social space and situation in which arguments must be made. Including what’s expected in terms of propriety or fitness for the occasion” (58). To explain further, Fletcher uses rapper Eminem’s song “Lose Yourself,” which shows precisely what Kairos is. “It’s all about a precise combination of timing and action; it’s about recognizing or creating just the right moment to make the right move, and to do that, students must be able to tell one unique moment from the next” (58). Eminem’s song is appropriate because it is about capturing a moment and not letting it go, which is what Kairos is all about—a brilliant illustration of how Fletcher connects student interest to their learning.

Supporting students in identifying and applying the rhetorical elements of occasion, audience, and purpose can be difficult for teachers; so, Fletcher provides a plethora of graphic organizers and step-by-step lessons to help teachers scaffold and reinforce student learning about these often confusing and complex rhetorical elements. Her examples are detailed, systematic, accessible (for both teacher and student), organized, current, relevant, and fun. She also provides detailed classroom activities to help guide students to engage authentic audiences and write with a clear purpose and appropriate occasion.

Preparing Sophisticated Writers

By writing rhetorically, supporting claims, using counterarguments, and incorporating ethos, pathos, logos, and Kairos, students will become more sophisticated writers who are ready for what lies outside the high school classroom.

Fletcher’s appendix is full of graphic organizers for teachers, both blank and student samples. Ultimately, Fletcher wants students to feel at home with rhetorical reading and writing. Teaching Arguments will assist teachers in helping students learn to write deeper and more sophisticated responses to texts. The end result is that students will craft more persuasive arguments time and time again about issues that are personally relevant and rewarding to them.

Dialoguing across Cultures, Identities, and Learning: Crosscurrents and Complexities in Literacy Classrooms

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Dialoguing across Cultures, Identities, and Learning: Crosscurrents and Complexities in Literacy Classrooms presents a genuine, tangible exploration of the nuanced, challenging, and complicated world in which educators and students live. The text is formatted in a nontraditional way, mirroring the progressive and complex themes it expounds upon, providing a theoretical framework and pedagogical tools that would appeal to the scholar and practitioner. In addition to providing a contextualization of theory, the text offers implications for practice in the literacy classroom. The book serves as a guide for navigating classroom conversations with and through text, and serves as a reminder of the real reasons we read, write, and engage in literacies.

According to Fecho and Clifton, literacy is not just about reading and writing; it is about communication, art, and other modalities. Literacy does not relate to a “set of discrete skills but as social practices that vary across time and space, taking different forms and having different consequences” (76). Teachers may find this book a welcome addition to the standards-based teaching advice common today; the authors stress that classrooms are “crying out for moments of stillness devoted to considering who we
have been, who we are, and who we are becoming” (59).

**Literacy Is a Dance**

The introduction sets the theoretical stage for the framework presented, rooted in concepts of “identity kits” (Gee), “emergent culture” (Greene), and “multiple I-positions” (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka)—all quoted in the book. The framework invites us to see ourselves as readers, educators, thinkers, and practitioners. Fecho and Clifton state that “as multicultural beings engaging in multicultural contexts, we dialogue both externally and internally with and through a range of cultural stances” (5). The classroom is a space wherein individuals continually co-construct meaning. This is a complicated dance that requires introspection, reflection, space, collaboration, and engagement. The text’s working theories invite teachers to reflect on cultures and identities, and explore how we can “construct dialogical stances” not just in our classrooms but also in the school community at large (17).

The structure of the text expands on concepts outlined in the introduction by presenting comments, perspectives, and insights into each author’s thoughts and in conversation between the authors. Readers are invited to consider how one’s internal dialogues, culture, and positioning relate to the text. This structure is continued through chapters on Learning, Literacies, Identities, and Agency. It mirrors the message in the text—that change can be incorporated over time, and that the process is flexible.

Teachers will find the text useful because of the way the authors connect theory to practice. The first chapter provides a foundation for the concepts of culture, dialogue, and the “dialogical self” and invites the reader to “consider the many ways we dialogue with cultures internally and externally” (25). The chapter is punctuated with a sidebar conversation in which the authors discuss the topic of interaction and transaction (27). The authors offer a “Connecting to Practice” section that provides practical suggestions about how to address complex ideas in the classroom. For instance, they suggest using universally compelling questions to enable “Constructing a shared and sustained dialogue” that connect students to the text, helping them to see how reading and writing serve as “meaning-making activities” that extend beyond an assigned task (36).

The second chapter explores the concept of learning as contextual and situated within cultural circumstances. The authors provide a vignette of a teacher who was going to be observed by an administrator during a literature lesson, only to realize that the students were fixated on a fight that had occurred during the last class period. This example illustrates a choice to address the matter or move forward with the lesson, and it provides an example of the kind of imbalance that could be an opportunity for growth. The third chapter connects the concepts of identities, learning, culture, and the dialogical self. Within this context, reading and writing are “interpretive and generative acts,” and when we write “we are interpreting our contexts and generating texts in order to create meaning” (86). The fourth chapter folds in the concept of identities and how we create meaning through various modalities, including art. Drawing from Bakhtin’s idea of ideological becoming, Fecho and Clifton indicate that “language users are ever in a process of renewing language and learning to make ideas and language their own—putting the ideas of others to work in a new way, to fashion a new word, a new world, a new way of seeing for one’s own purposes” (48). This statement lays the foundation for the text’s final exploration of how literacy can translate into agency.

**Teaching and Learning with All of Our Selves**

Dialoguing across Cultures, Identities, and Learning proposes that teachers must continuously reflect, listen, adjust, and provide the space to allow for growth within the literacy classroom. We must find a balance to consider the individual—both the student and the teacher—and offer opportunities to engage all of our “selves” in the learning. We are thinkers and facilitators of learning; we must listen, engage, and question our assumptions and internal conversations. (6)

Maggie Abbott received degrees from California State University Monterey Bay and California State Northridge, and completed her master’s degree in English education in May 2017. A teacher at Granada Hills Charter High School since 2003 and the grade 9 curriculum leader for the past five years, Maggie has been an NCTE member since 2003. Johanna S. Tramantano is a doctoral student at NYU Steinhardt in the Teaching and Learning Department, focusing her studies on literacy education. Prior to becoming an educational consultant, she served as the director of Literacy, ELA, and Reading for a large urban district. She also worked as a teacher, literacy coach, and assistant principal in New York City. Johanna has been a member of NCTE since 2001.