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RHETORIC IN COMPOSITION: TEACHING WRITING TO FOSTER AGENCY AND INDEPENDENCE IN STUDENTS

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Writing Rhetorically: Fostering Responsive Thinkers and Communicators is a book written by Jennifer Fletcher and published by Stenhouse Publishers on 2021-07-14. The book aims to coalesce the theories of rhetoric and composition pedagogy to foster agency and independence in students wherein the teacher collaborates and facilitates writing activities to enable the students to transfer their skills of writing rhetorically both at the divergent present and in the unpredictable future. The discussions throughout the book, however, have been circumscribed around the US educational settings. The book has eight chapters excluding the introduction and the conclusion, and each chapter well-articulates a distinct rhetoric-pedagogical concept along with some scholarly references, illustrations, images, real classroom examples, and activities.

The argument of *Writing Rhetorically* is built upon the problem-solving strategy. Fletcher, as a writing teacher, identifies a problem: "we sometimes teach writing in ways that increase students' dependence on us and delay their growth as problem solvers" (p. xviii). For her, increasing students' dependence rather than independence is a common flaw of composition pedagogy. As a solution to this problem, as Fletcher claims, the book "offers a different approach" by exemplifying some strategies that "honor and nurture students' rhetorical agency" to promote their independence through writing classrooms (p. xviii). Fletcher, while developing the pedagogical strategies of fostering students' agency and independence, supports her claims by drawing upon the analysis and interpretation of her qualitative data: teaching resources, sample assignment templates, discussion topics, her personal reflections, students' responses and essays, and her evaluation criteria. Therefore, Fletcher's methodological stance in the book is the theorization of composition pedagogy by synthesizing the essentials extracted from her classroom activities, experiences, and observations as a writing teacher.

Writing Rhetorically successfully tames the pleasant suspense of the readers by exposing a research gap before taking

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them to the core discussions. The exigency of teaching and writing 'rhetorically' has been intensified through 'Foreword', 'Acknowledgement' and 'Introduction'. The foreword, penned by Jim Burke, makes emphatic claims on the book: "every book makes a promise to its readers" and "Jennifer Fletcher's *Writing Rhetorically* delivers on a very important promise: to help us become excellent writing teachers" (p. xi). In the 'Acknowledgement' section, Fletcher writes that the book is an outcome of constant support and encouragement from her colleagues and students from Arizona State University. She credits: "These are the folks who taught me what it means to take a rhetorical approach to texts" (p. xv). It not only shows her humility but also impresses the readers that *Writing Rhetorically* is a fruition of Fletcher's years of professional experience and expertise. The introduction entitled 'Understanding Writing as Communication and Problem Solving' retains and reinforces the relevance of *Writing Rhetorically*. It does so by exposing a research problem. The gap, in Fletcher's own experience, is that   students from high school to first-year college writing classrooms ask the same questions: "How do I start?" "What do I say now?" "Should I just write one paragraph on each source?" "Is this right?" "What's my thesis?" (p. xvii). Now, the problem is why students ask such questions every time and how a writing teacher can fill in such a gap. The solution, as Fletcher writes, is that writing teachers should thrive in "Cultivating Independent Learners Through Rhetorical Thinking" (p. xvii). Hence, the introductory sections of *Writing Rhetorically* create a context or exigence to the entire discussions made in the book.

In Chapter-1: "Taking the Rhetorical Approach", Fletcher contrasts rhetorical approach to prescriptivism. She integrates the rhetoric and writing. She writes that the rhetorical approach in teaching writing means to take into consideration "audience, purpose, context and genre" wherein "the ultimate goal is deep and transferable learning" (p. 3). In this chapter, Fletcher proposes rhetorical approaches against prescriptivism, which is an act of "providing an outline that told students exactly what they needed to address in each section of their essay" (p. 6). For Fletcher, prescriptivism hinders students' expertise and social change and therefore, 'rhetorical sensitivity' is to be developed in students by taking them to a wide range of texts and genres produced in different contexts in order to familiarize them with how rhetorical contexts bring different writing decisions and choices.

Likewise, in Chapter-2, "Teaching Writing for Transfer", Fletcher proposes flexibility over rigidity. She wants writing teachers to "consider the intellectual agility" that helps the students "to successfully negotiate all the different literacy sites and situations they'll encounter in the twenty-first-century world" (p. 22). Fletcher argues that such transfer is possible not through bounded framing (rigidity) but with expansive framing (flexibility), that is, imparting procedural, conceptual and conditional knowledge to students in writing classrooms. It is where students make a transition from mimicry to mastery, dependence to independence.

Eventually, Chapter-3, "Preparing to Enter the Conversation", takes the readers to some rhetorical approaches of teaching writing. It amplifies "inquiry, discussion, and dialogue skills that are essential to effective communication and problem solving" (p. 52). Here, Fletcher gives some examples of conversations corresponding to feelings or pathos, rhetorical situations, problems, and engaging in dialogue across differences. In this chapter, the example of

doing a 'Socratic Seminar' (picking a debatable topic, dialoguing, and reaching a consensus) to raise critical dialogue skills in a writing classroom is very interesting. The discussion further goes lively when Fletcher takes writing against the grain (believing and doubting game), 'stasis theory' (seeking points of negotiation in order to make a departure) and '*Kairos'* (an opportune moment of doing or saying something) as a part of critical conversations in writing classrooms. Thus, it feels like the author is putting a fresh spin on traditional classroom practices.

Then, Chapter-4, "Negotiating Different Voices and Perspectives", throws light on building abilities and patience in the students to listen to the differing worldviews than that of their own. Fletcher pronounces that it is possible by means of rhetorical empathy and democratic exchange of ideas, taking people and their worldviews as sources, hosting conversations, using quotations, paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing, responding skills such as defense, counterargument, and rebuttal. Interestingly, Fletcher takes the Modern Language Association (MLA) documentation style as an engagement to the views of others on the topic under discussion. According to Fletcher, MLA *Handbook*, especially its eighth edition, encourages writers to think rhetorically because it teaches them to "examine the available information, evaluate their readers' needs, and make their own choices" (p. 107). Hence, for Fletcher, encouraging the students to negotiate with different voices existing in the world promotes rhetorical thinking in writing classrooms.

After that, Chapter-5, "Designing and Conducting Research", aims to introduce the basics of research in writing classrooms. Fletcher believes that research writing is part of a problem-solving writing process that "requires our most adaptive and flexible thinking, our highest tolerance for ambiguity, our best efforts to understand different perspectives, and our full embrace of failure" (p. 115). In such types of writing classes, students have been assisted and encouraged to define problems, achieve stasis, form research questions, read for research, find/evaluate/analyze the primary and secondary sources, collect evidence, make a mess, integrate sources, and finally take the research as a writing process.

Moreover, Chapter-6, "Reasoning from Evidence", wants writing teachers to take writing as reasoning and inquiry. The rationale behind it is to develop in students the "critical reasoning skills that lead to informed, effective, and ethical responses to twenty-first-century problems" (p. 181). Here, enabling the students to make a gradual journey from oversimplification to critical reasoning skills is the teachers' responsibility. For that purpose, classroom activities analyzing, valuing, and evaluating the sources of information can be productive, wherein students can make claims out of the evidence and make a full line of reasoning based on evidence, claims, warrants, and assumptions.

Furthermore, Chapter-7, "Making Choices About Genre and Structure", avers that audience is an influencing force in making students decide the genre and structure of any writing. Fletcher writes: "If the three most important things in real estate are 'location, location, location,' then the three most important things in written communication are 'audience, audience, audience'" (p. 181). The writing teacher can facilitate the students in anticipating the audience

experience, observing the social conventions and constraints, and introducing with some mentor texts. Based on the audience and purpose, the teacher can foster a deeper understanding of genres and their structures. Here, the students can make structural decisions on backgrounding and foregrounding, introduction and conclusion, turning points, etcetera.

After that, Chapter-8, "Revising Rhetorically", urges writing teachers to help students to do rhetorical revision. Fletcher takes rhetorical revision "re-seeing our writing through key aspects of the rhetorical situation, including the audience, purpose, context, and genre . . . through the various perspectives and practices of the discourse community they're trying to engage" (p. 217). Here, reading and analyzing the writings from the audience' perspective is important. Then, during the revising process, a descriptive outlining regarding the language and arrangement may help the students.

Finally, "Conclusion: A Final Few Words" reiterates the goal of *Writing Rhetorically.* Fletcher writes: "rhetorical thinking is the key to transfer because it prepares students to independently adapt and apply their literacy learning in new situations" (p. 245). The motto of teaching writing rhetorically is to "empower students to raise their own voices and make their own choices as writers and learners" (p. 246). Hence, *Writing Rhetorically* takes teaching writing both as a process and a project wherein the agency and independence of students have always been endorsed. In *Writing Rhetorically,* the conclusion has been followed by 15 appendices which are also part of discussions made throughout the book. The appendices include her context and content of writing topics, assignment templates, students' responses and their sample essays, illustrations, charts, and assignment evaluation criteria from her writing classroom experiences.

Undoubtedly, the readers can observe that the rhetoric of *Writing Rhetorically* by Jennifer Fletcher has several strengths. One worth mentioning feature of *Writing Rhetorically* is that it not only takes the readers to the abstract theories but also shows how those theories can be applied in writing classrooms. The title of each chapter makes the readers anticipate the forthcoming discussion. Different concepts of rhetorical writing, in all the chapters, have been elaborated with examples, illustrations, and colored highlights of the key ideas. For example, while discussing hosting conversation in Chapter-4, Fletcher illustrates it and makes it easy for the readers to understand it (p. 87). Moreover, even though the book delves into eight different concepts in eight chapters, the principal argument remains undeniably the same: to foster independence and agency in students in writing classes to enable them to transfer their rhetorical writing skills both at present and in the future. Likewise, the book is an easy-to-follow imperative where the readers can find the balance between theory and practice, and implication and application with many examples. For example, in Chapter-8, Fletcher gives an example of enabling the students to write and revise better by posing some doubting games (p. 230). Likewise, we can see one of the first colored highlights of the key idea in the first chapter (p. 5). Hence, *Writing Rhetorically* is one of the books that articulates the concepts of rhetorical writing not only with texts but also with images and illustrations.