

Teaching Rhetorical Criticism the “Natural Way”: By Apprenticeship

Rebecca LaVally

Stoner, M., & Perkins, S. (2005). *Making sense of messages: A critical apprenticeship in rhetorical criticism*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. 343 pp. \$61.56 (paperback).

If Collins, Brown, and Newman (1989) are right in suggesting that “apprenticeship is the way we learn most naturally” (p. 491), then the most natural way to learn the deep-thinking art of rhetorical criticism must be as an apprentice to a master of critical thought. But how *does* one think critically? Can it be described? Can it be taught, even by a master thinker?

Mark Stoner and Sally Perkins, who collaborated in teaching both instructional communication and rhetorical criticism at California State University, Sacramento, contend that, yes, thinking can be taught in much the way an apprentice would learn music-making, pot-throwing, or carpentry from a master. *Making Sense of Messages* pursues the twin goals of teaching undergraduates how to think critically and how to criticize thoughtfully. In illustrating how to get there, Stoner and Perkins are teaching process *and* product, and grounding their book where learning begins.

Teaching through apprenticeship does entail blazing twin paths, explain Collins et al., because “we need both to understand the nature of expert practice and to devise methods appropriate to learning that practice” (1989, p. 455). In accepting that challenge, Stoner and Perkins bridge gaps in other textbooks by building a blueprint for higher-order thinking. Step by step, they explain how to describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate rhetoric so that learners can deliver products of thought.

Part I offers a readable introduction to the practice of rhetorical criticism in two chapters, followed by five chapters in Part II devoted to explaining and illustrating the endeavor of critical thinking. A hallmark of *Making Sense of Messages* is that definitions are offered after concepts are introduced and explored, so the definitions reinforce ideas now understood. For instance, Chapter 4, which explains the initial

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step of *description* in thinking critically, recounts that scientist Samuel Scudder spent three days at the behest of his teacher learning to describe a fish; in the days that followed, more fish of the same kind materialized, requiring still more descriptions. “Description helps you slow down and consciously think about what you observe in the message, which helps you move beyond your first ‘glandular’ reaction,” Stoner and Perkins explain (p. 47). When they define *description* a bit later as “characterizing the message under analysis,” we appreciate what it means to characterize a message (p. 47). Part II ends this exploration of “process to product” with a transition chapter that explains how to present ideas and arguments, especially in writing.

From this solid platform, Part III dives into an explanation of the methodology of critical analysis in nine chapters that concisely yet comprehensively illustrate nine approaches, ranging from the classical through the dramatistic to the sociopolitical. Even here, close to the starting point for some other textbooks, *Making Sense of Messages* surprises. It includes ideological approaches, for instance, sometimes overlooked elsewhere, and an insightful final chapter on analyzing the function of visual messages in persuasion. The breadth and depth of this 184-page section make it an excellent resource for anyone, including graduate students, desiring a clearly articulated overview of criticism’s theories and theorists. In illustrating the application of each “search model,” as the authors call these approaches, the focus continues to be on *how* to achieve meaningful criticism.

Stoner, Assistant Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at CSUS, and Perkins, now at Butler University, compare their book’s approach to the way a craftsperson would teach an apprentice to construct furniture. “All too often,” states their *Instructor’s Resource Manual*, teachers of rhetorical criticism “either hand students a set of written directions or hand them an academic essay . . . and say, ‘Go and make one like this’” (2005, p. vi). The hard, even daunting, intellectual work required in approaching and completing the task lies hidden. “Perhaps instructors mask the process because it is less visible than the process of making, say, a chair, but we believe this masking is unproductive and prohibitive for the student” (p. vi). Thinking through and revealing the steps required to pursue “even a largely cognitive process like rhetorical criticism,” they assert, “simply requires a different mindset on the part of the instructor” (p. vi).

Expect no bells and whistles from this textbook; it is spare and fulfills its mission without fanfare. But its examples and word pictures can grasp and hold a reader. A complex courtroom scene opens the chapter on postmodern approaches; the chapter on ideological methods describes the Mall of America in rich detail. Its subjects of analysis and narrative illustrations—from Clinton’s apologia over the Monica Lewinsky affair to Martha Stewart’s home page, from *Shrek* to the World Wrestling Federation’s *Smackdown!*, from clues to the existence of Pluto to secrets of card-playing—make the book vibrant and relevant.

Because Stoner and Perkins illustrate both *process* and *product* in constructing their many examples for creating criticism, it may appear they have done all the hard work. As instructional communicators, however, they are not about to let teachers off easily. Barbara Rogoff (1990) in *Apprenticeship in Thinking* explains it this way:

“The expert too is still developing breadth and depth of skill and understanding in the process of carrying out the activity and guiding others in it” (p. 39).

Thus Stoner and Perkins insist that an apprenticeship approach means that teachers must model rhetorical thinking, with all the painful false starts and blind alleys it entails. “Instructors must make themselves somewhat vulnerable by thinking about messages using these four cognitive processes [description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation], unrehearsed, in front of students,” they write in their *Instructor’s Resource Manual*. “The process of discovering the workings of a rhetorical message is messy, and the students need to see this messiness” (p. vi). Yet this is not a messy book. It is tidy, trim, and clear, and illustrates precisely how master thinkers function.

References

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