NEW BOOK

RECLAIMING THE IMAGINATION:
PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR WRITERS AND TEACHERS OF WRITING

Ann Berthoff, editor

Is the ability to use imagination waning in today’s society and classrooms? Is the ability or desire for writing teachers to use their imaginations waning?

In Reclaiming the Imagination: Philosophical Perspectives for Writers and Teachers of Writing, Ann Berthoff poses serious questions for writers and teachers of writing. She is to be applauded for compiling this collection of hard-to-find and out-of-print articles, essays, passages from notebooks, letters and talks by writers, artists, philosophers, and scientists.

Berthoff suggests reclaiming the imagination as a “name for the active mind, the mind in action making meaning.” The reader is taken through articles, essays, and addresses by Burke, Langer, Vygotsky, I.A. Richards, C.S. Pierce, Cassirer, Oppenheimer, Addams, Cezanne, Paul Klee, and others. She organizes these into four sections: 1. Perception and the Apprehension of Form, 2. Language and the Making of Meaning, 3. Interpretation and the Act of Knowing, and 4. Artists at Work.

The strength of Berthoff’s book is that it focuses on the creative process. The essays are not easy reading. They are, however, rich in their ability to guide the reader into looking at the “process-oriented” schools of writing, teaching and thinking. The book guides the reader through an examination of the creative process and questions that artists, writers, scientists, and philosophers ask themselves. It looks at the amorphous link between creativity and productivity. By looking at others’ creative processes, we find that “their observations and speculations are encouraging to anyone who wants to think about thinking.”

The idea of thinking about thinking (or metacognition) is being used more and more by writers and teachers of writing today. The practice of keeping learning logs (process-oriented written observations and speculations) and of writers consciously monitoring their creative thinking/writing process would be enlightened by the last section of the book “Artists at Work.” These essays will certainly offer insight into “ways of thinking about what we are trying to do when we write so that we can discover how to do it.”

Any composition course, we are told by Berthoff, should begin with exercises in observation. Thus, the opening section, entitled “Perception and the Apprehension of Form” engages the reader’s mind and eye to look, and then look again. I especially liked R.L. Gregory’s section from The Intelligent Eye explaining how the use of the senses, the eye, and the brain evolved in man’s development.

Language is the heuristic in Berthoff’s latest book. In the second section of the book “Language and the Making of Meaning,” we find the richness and depth of Vygotsky, Max Black, Alfred North Whitehead, Cassirer, Langer, and others. One of the audiences for this book could be a graduate school rhetoric class. It addresses theories of knowledge, the study and teaching of English language—rhetoric, and literary and artistic creation.

Sections of the book, we are told by Berthoff, are to be read “with a tolerance of ambiguity and an interest in explaining the practical applications.” Berthoff is right that the book is heavier on theory and research, with the practical applications and methods left for the reader to connect. So the book is true to its subtitle: Philosophical Perspectives for Writers and Teachers of Writing.

In the end, what binds this book together is that all of the individuals represented here share a belief in the powers of the creative process, the active mind and imagination.

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