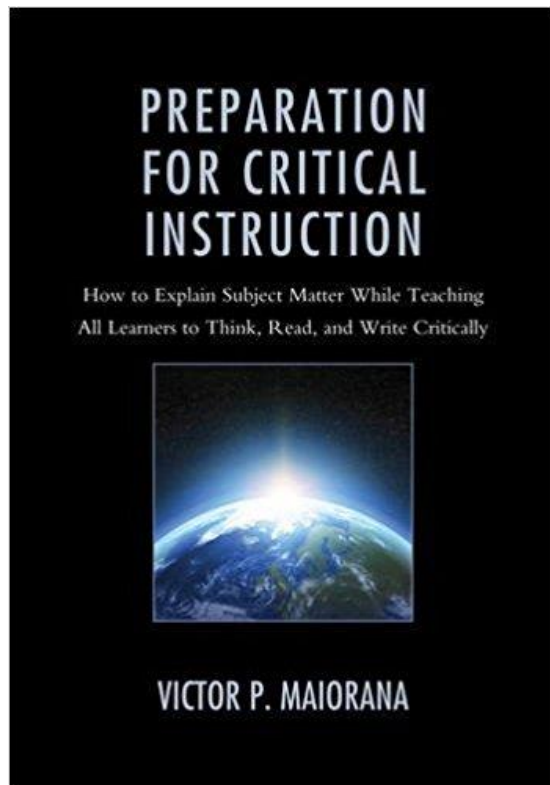


Book Review

How to Explain Subject Matter While Teaching All Learners to Think, Read, and Write Critically

“Preparation for Critical Instruction” by Victor P. Maiorana

By Kathleen A. Tobin



Victor Maiorana laments that although public instruction in the United States is rooted in the early sixteenth century and teacher training in the early eighteenth century, the nation severely lacks preparation in critical instruction. If this is indeed the case, and Maiorana argues convincingly that it is, the problem is even greater given the current weight assigned to the value of critical thinking in our schools, especially by stakeholders cited in Association of American Colleges and

Universities (AACU) reports, for example, advocating for initiatives like Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP). If, as the AACU asserts, society needs critical thinkers and employers hire graduates who can think, something must be done to ensure teachers can do what it takes to get students there. Further—and very importantly—Maiorana reminds us that thinking lies at the basis of all learning. It need not be detached from the essentials of reading, writing, listening, speaking, comprehension, or calculation.

To some degree, *Preparation for Critical Instruction* speaks to scholars in the field of education more readily than to instructors across the disciplines who might gain from Maiorana’s work. However, he makes two very important points that can benefit all who wish to carry out this task in professional practice. First, instructors should acknowledge that it is natural for humans to think critically; this is not something alien or complicated that needs to be imposed or forced on students. Consequently, instructors should view their students as ready to think and acquire skills needed to foster this with relative ease. Second, critical instruction can be accomplished more effectively when it is subject-based. For those in seemingly incongruent disciplines, the approach to critical instruction can (and should) be grounded in what teachers already know about their subjects. An instructor is naturally immersed in subject matter, particularly at the post-secondary level,

and wants to convey knowledge about the subject to students. However, this immersion in knowledge can also create a framework for asking the right questions and developing effective assignments where instructors can operate with confidence. These two main points are instrumental to expanding the practice of critical instruction, because they take discussion of this expertise more freely beyond the limits of academic pedagogy and into the hands of teachers in an array of areas.

Maiorana first introduces readers to the language of instruction and instructional strategies, techniques, and methods that have been used widely by traditional and creative teachers. Here, he touches on concepts that may likely be familiar to all instructors when they consider critical thinking: explaining, analyzing, and problem solving initiated through approaches such as experiential learning, role playing, simulation, and debate. However, he argues, these are limited in scope and effectiveness “if the underlying instructional thinking strategy is weak” (p. 4). The strength of instructional thinking strategy, Maiorana argues, requires an understanding of what he terms “subject matter universals” and “mind grammar” (p. 5). The most important universal is the subject matter objective, which is essentially the meaning, purpose, or function of the subject matter. Mind grammar, says Maiorana, is the “innate, systematic, and patterned way that the human mind develops and encounters the world and all its subject matter,” and it provides the means to critically understand it (p. 5). As complex as this might seem to faculty not well-versed in contemporary examinations of critical thinking in the academic field of education, it principally simplifies the ways in which we might include it in our teaching. For example, I know deeply what the meaning, purpose, and function are of my own field—history—and I have a good understanding

of how the human mind encounters it. For me, that is not the case for science, math, literature, or a myriad of other subjects. I may be interested in them and respectfully value the work of my colleagues in adding to the holistic edification of my students, but I am not passionate enough about them, or immersed enough in them, to make a notable difference in those areas. Secondary education majors, and perhaps even more so elementary education majors, may more commonly examine numerous subjects and note the ways in which the human mind encounters them. For those of us embedded in one area of expertise and with little to no grounding in pedagogy, we may not know fully the purpose of others’ disciplines or how the human mind develops in those areas. I know what history is and why my students should know it, how they should know it, and what questions I might ask in my investigations of it. I also know enough to understand the variations in purpose regarding United States history, Latin American history, Hispanic-American history, and Latina history. I believe Maiorana is correct in encouraging faculty to begin where they are in this respect. By reminding us that this kind of thinking is innate, the task of getting our students to think critically feels much less daunting.

Chapters 7 and 8 of *Preparation for Critical Instruction* encourage teachers to revisit ways in which we approach the use of reading and writing—essential across the disciplines—by infusing critical comprehension and critical explanation with an acknowledgment of mind grammar where appropriate. For example, written material should not be read passively and simply for information; rather, the reader should take intellectual charge of textual material (p. 89). Writing need not take a conventionally logical form that may be chronological, comparative, hierarchical, or taxonomic; rather, it might include an analysis of subject matter objectives and consequences

(p. 103). Certainly, good teachers have known and practiced this for quite some time, so perhaps they might benefit from “subject universals” and “mind grammar” workshops centering on proposals set forth by Maiorana. He does present a number of questions at the end of each chapter (for example, “Why does one revise a draft?” and “What is proofreading, and what does it aim to accomplish?”) designed to evoke an examination of one’s own teaching (p. 112). Simply asking these questions of ourselves as instructors or of our students seems more valuable than simply directing the acts of proofreading and revising. However, further discussion among colleagues might facilitate a better understanding and application of some of Maiorana’s more intricate prescriptions.

In all, *Preparation for Critical Instruction* is thought provoking and particularly useful for instructors at secondary and post-secondary levels who wish to scrutinize and refresh their work. It has become increasingly important to include critical instruction in the classroom and devise ways to assess critical thinking among students, so any assistance from experts is appreciated. Maiorana’s perspectives should be considered, and reading his work may well be a step in the right direction.

“Preparation for Critical Instruction: How to Explain Subject Matter While Teaching All Learners to Think, Read, and Write Critically.” By Victor P. Maiorana. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-4758-2541-1

About the Author

Victor P. Maiorana earned his doctorate in curriculum and instruction at New York University, for which he won a scholarship and leadership award, and a research award, for his work on critical thinking and subject matter comprehension. He is the originator of mind grammar for subject matter, which develops and applies the mind’s innate ability to think critically to

reading, writing, and comprehending content in all disciplines.

About the Reviewer

Kathleen A. Tobin earned her Ph.D. in history from the University of Chicago and teaches United States and Latin American history at Purdue University Northwest. She has served on the Indiana Commission of Higher Education and subsequently Indiana’s Statewide Transfer and Articulation committee, and is currently heading her campus Department of History and Philosophy and the Office of International Affairs. She is serving as Vice President of the Indiana Association of History. She loves all things related to teaching and learning.