Book review: Rhetorical work in emergency medical services: Communicating in the unpredictable workplace

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A Review of *Rhetorical Work in Emergency Medical Services:*

Communicating in the Unpredictable Workplace

Marissa C. McKinley

Rhetorical Work in Emergency Medical Services: Communicating in the Unpredictable Workplace. By Elizabeth L. Angeli. New York, NY: Routledge, 2019. 204 pages, $47.95 paper, $23.98 e-book.

Elizabeth L. Angeli's *Rhetorical Work in Emergency Medical Services:*

Communicating in the Unpredictable Workplace details the rhetorical work undertaken

by emergency medical services (EMS) professionals as they navigate the unstable nature

of their workplace and respond to unpredictable medical situations. Angeli's main

argument is that EMS professionals "harness rhetoric's power to navigate their high-

stakes, unpredictable workplace" (p. 13) through the use of verbal and nonverbal

communication.

Before exemplifying the instability of the EMS workplace—not knowing "what to

expect, what will happen, or where [to] go" (p. 18)—and before demonstrating the

rhetorical work that EMS communicators undertake, Angeli uses the majority of chapter

one to offer readers a "scene size-up" (p. 1). She explains that when EMS professionals

are called to a scene, these personnel lean on their senses, memory, and intuition to gather

and contextualize details about the scene and patient. The details gathered become the

"backstory" for the emergency call and help warrant decisions surrounding patient

treatment and documentation of the medical event (p. 1). Just as a "backstory" is used to

justify the methods and processes enacted by EMS professionals, Angeli asserts that

researchers, too, often have and rely upon a "backstory," or a "scene size-up," to help

inform and contextualize their research design and findings (p. 1). The author states that

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it is in revealing a research project's backstory that readers can understand the exigencies for the project and how the researcher navigated any challenges, which may have shaped the outcomes for their research findings.

Angeli details her own "scene-size up" (p. 1) in chapter one, discussing how she became involved in EMS work and how she "managed, engaged with, and developed agency" while studying Lochville EMS (p. 2). The remainder of the chapter previews the discussions contained in each of the following six chapters. Chapters two through seven begin with narratives stemming from Angeli's own experiences working with EMS personnel and patients. These vignettes illustrate the primary argument contained in each chapter and begin to demonstrate EMS rhetorical work in action. The chapters conclude with "takeaways" for technical and professional communication (TPC) and rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM) readers and for EMS readers (p. 17).

To provide readers with a fuller understanding of the framework used to explain how EMS communicators use rhetoric in their workplace, chapter two, "Managing the Unpredictable Workplace through Rhetorical Work," further defines and explains the elements of rhetorical work. Chapter three, "A Rhetorical History of a Developing Field," captures the history and development of the EMS profession. Chapter four, "Studying the Unpredictable Workplace," describes the methods Angeli used to study the rhetorical work of Lochville EMS personnel. Chapter five, "Using Multisensory Invention in the Unpredictable Workplace," discusses how the EMS personnel Angeli studied engaged in the rhetorical work of "multisensory invention" (p. 87), defined as a "process through which EMS professionals gather data through the senses and use intuition to assess a

situation, act, and communicate relevant information to different audiences" (p. 87). Multisensory invention is, as Angeli argues, a key component to rhetorical work in EMS.

Informed by the theories of distributed cognition, multisensory invention, and rhetorical memory, chapter six, "Integrating Distributed Cognition, Memory, and Writing into the Unpredictable Workplace," demonstrates how EMS personnel use three types of memory—individual, collaborative, and professional—to "distribute cognition while composing to reduce cognitive workload" (p. 17). Finally, chapter seven, "Preparing Communicators for Unpredictable Workplaces," presents the pedagogical applications of Angeli's research findings before synthesizing them and offering activities that TPC, RHM, and EMS educators can assign to students and trainees to help them cultivate data gathering, decision-making, and documentation skills.

All of Angeli's intended audiences—EMS, TPC, and RHM researchers, teachers, and students—can find value in her text. For example, EMS readers will likely find value in the review of the profession's history and in the stories that emerge out of the workplace. While the review highlights the development of the EMS field and illustrates the historical "instability" (p. 44) of it (e.g., the "distinct boundary between EMS and other medical specialties that it interfaces with daily, including emergency medicine" (p. 44)), the stories offered help "preserve medical practices and tactics that newer EMS professionals might not learn in the classroom" (p. 52).

TPC and RHM readers, on the other hand, may be drawn to the book's main goal—to document and discuss EMS communication practices and the rhetorical work involved in such practices—as well as in Angeli's illustrations of how rhetoric has the ability to persuade in the EMS environment through "unquantifiable methods, such as the

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senses, memory, and invention techniques" (p. 14). It is this latter offering that expands understandings about the role and importance of these methods in EMS work and how they play an essential part in how EMS communicators manage the situations they face.

RHM scholars may also be interested in the conversation recognizing the ethical and methodological challenges characteristic of feminist research in Angeli's text. Such challenges include conducting Internet research, working with vulnerable populations, and studying the unpredictable workplace, as Angeli has done. For example, in what Kristin M. Bivens (2018) would describe as a "methodological reflection" (p. 139), Angeli recounts how issues of access and trust impacted her study and how she had to modify a research method, the critical decision method model, to respond to these challenges. Through documentation of her "process-focused" (Walton, Zraly, & Mugengana, 2015, p. 46) reflection, Angeli both illuminates the "messiness" that often characterizes RHM work (Scott & Melonçon, 2018, p. 4) and illustrates how RHM scholars deploying feminist methods must often negotiate and adapt their research methods. It is Angeli's reflection that assists in moving the field of RHM forward, for it makes transparent how she responded to the constraints and exigencies found in the unpredictable environment she studied—insights which can help direct other scholars undertaking feminist research in RHM.

Finally, chapter seven may be most useful for TPC, RHM, and EMS educators interested in preparing students and trainees for communicating in the unpredictable workplace. Expertly organized, readers of the chapter are likely to appreciate Angeli's summary of the writing-EMS training disconnect, synthesis of her research findings, and explanations for why pedagogical activities are needed to "account for the rhetorical

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work that is required in the field" (p. 155). Additionally, readers may find value in the amount of contextualization offered by Angeli to understand the purpose for each writing exercise and how each activity can assist students with cultivating particular communication skills. Lastly, readers may appreciate both the scaffolding of each writing assignment and the detailing of how each pedagogical assignment promotes rhetorical work. Overall, *Rhetorical Work in Emergency Medical Services* is a text that should occupy the bookshelves of those interested in the power of rhetoric and how it presides during emergency medical situations.

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