DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 271 CS 212 422

AUTHOR Rosati, Annette C.
TITLE (Dis)Placement of Current-Traditional Rhetoric's Approach in a Composition Class.
PUB DATE 11 Jul 90
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing (Indiana, PA, July 10-11, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; College English; Creative Writing; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Rhetorical Invention; *Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Processes; Writing Strategies; Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Classical Rhetoric; *Empowerment; *Personal Writing; Writing Development; Writing to Learn

ABSTRACT

An adjunct faculty member who teaches in three very different colleges and universities sees the similarity of course objectives for freshman writing, in which each program emphasizes rhetorical mode requirements to the exclusion of writing as discovery. Student writing is product-centered, and the writing act is linear in that it adheres to a discourse formula. Students are not encouraged to express or explore their own ideas on an assigned topic, rather they need to find information for their topic, narrow the topic, create a thesis statement, and adhere to a preconceived outline. Furthermore, the writing programs transmit contradictory messages, simultaneously indicating the value of free writing and insisting on formal outlines and the finished product. The problem appears to be one of mixing modern rhetoric with classical rhetoric in pedagogical theory and practice, i.e., illogically merging the process and product approaches into a current-traditional paradigm. Rather, the writing classroom should be opened up for personal expression in which the student is put on equal footing with the instructor. The writing instructor is no longer the true authority of expression, and the classroom becomes a discourse community. This atmosphere empowers students to be responsible for their learning. (KEH)

(Dis)Placement of Current-Traditional Rhetoric's Approach in a Composition Classroom

Annette C. Rosati

July 11, 1990

(Dis)Placement of Current-Traditional Rhetoric's Approach in a Composition Classroom

Since I am an adjunct faculty member for three very different colleges and universities, I experience three rigid and similar department requirements for Freshman English or Composition I. No travelling adjunct teacher would be surprised at three similar Department syllabii's objectives that students must complete in order to "pass" Composition I. For example, all three universities list the following behavioral objectives:

> To fulfill the minimum requirement of Composition I, students must be able by the end of the quarter to:
>
> > write essays that accomplish a variety of expository purposes; e.g. describe, inform, analyze, and evaluate; and
> >
> > to strengthen their essays by revising preliminary drafts effectively and by editing their writing to conform to the standards of educated English.
>
> No student should pass Composition I without having demonstrated MASTERY of the written sentence and avoid or eliminate through revision and editing such GROSS sentence errors as subject-verb disagreement, fragments, and run-ons (or fused sentences) unless used for a CONVENTIONAL stylistic purpose.

One college department syllabus takes these requirements into Composition II or Research Writing: Each student must write four shorter writings which emphasize "persuasion," "argumentation," "evaluation," and "critiques of various sorts." Unfortunately, in no department syllabus is it written "students must have practice in developing or creating their

personal voice and style to convey a message or meaning to an intended audience." Is writing as discovery, as learning, as creating absent because of the rhetorical mode requirement, as illustrated above, or is it due to a lack of value for each student's opinion and expression, or worse yet, is it due to both of the above?

Connors (1987) says, "The question of personal writing is uncomfortable for many teachers because it presents such a clear mirror of one's individual philosophy of education" (181). Connors also poses the debate which he claims ". . . teachers have argued about for the last hundred years or more" (166). The argument Connors refers to, whether or not personal writing assignments should be accepted in traditional composition courses, in practice, tends to be a more formal, conservative, traditional way of defining whether the teaching of writing has "product" or "process" orientation distinctions.

To clarify: the teaching of classical rhetoric cannot be equated with product-oriented teaching, for one is not inherent in the other, but there seems to be a product-centered approach in a classical, more traditional, composition classroom, as well as what seems to be a process-centered approach in a modern rhetorical composition classroom. For example, the structure of the product-centered classroom emphasizes classical rhetorical forms, where students' writing is non-personal in the sense that the students write in an objective voice, somewhat removed from emotion and committment. Their writing is not given value and authority (Faigley 537). The final writing product is not

read for ideas, but read to be graded because the teaching of grammar is the vehicle for the teaching of writing.

Conversely, in a true process-centered classroom the rhetorical modes are not given value; instead, the writer's individual personal voice creates its own style and form. The student writes from experience or writes to discover, and the writing is given value and authority. Writing for purpose, audience, and meaning are the criteria for evaluation.

But, why is there a distinction between classical rhetoric and modern rhetoric in pedagogical theory and in practice? How do they seem to create the distinction between process and product teaching philosophies? First of all, an overview of the evolution of classical to modern rhetoric is necessary before these questions can be answered.

According to Connors, the evolution of classical rhetoric to modern rhetoric occurred in the seventeenth century as concern for the individual began to emerge. Also, vernacular literature contributed to the emergence of the individual by celebrating the individual of the common people. But, before the seventeenth century, "the classical tradition in rhetoric...was essentially unconcerned with personal expression of personal experience. There was no branch of ancient learning that meant to teach students how to 'express themselves' in any personal way; the very idea of teaching such a thing was alien to the ancients" (168-69). The classical rhetorician-student, then, had to seek the truth as knowledge beyond the self in order to find that objective reality.

Knoblauch and Brannon (1984) point out that "the purpose of the discourse in this ancient epistemological context was very simple: its moral imperative was to convey the truth in a verbal dress that would make it attractively visible to particular audiences on particular occasions" (23). As one can see, before the seventeenth century there was no concern for the individual's personal expression; the concern was for procuring a personal chunk of suspended independent knowledge. This stance continued into the eighteenth-century via Common Sense Realism expressed by George Campbell and his text, Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776). In addition to obtaining an objective knowledge, style and form were also emphasized: "The study of rhetoric...focuses on developing skills in arrangement and style (Berlin 51-52). This description of rhetoric identifies what is now called current-traditional rhetoric and still dominates writing instruction today.

In a current-traditional class, writing is product-centered, and the writing act is linear as it adheres to a discourse formula. Stress is placed on "knowing about" the topic, as the text is the source of knowledge. Still, students are not encouraged to express or explore their own ideas on a assigned topic. They must find the information for their topic, narrow the topic, create a thesis sentence, and adhere to an preconceived outline. In other words, the writer has to already know what he/she wants to say before writing.

The characteristics of modern rhetoric as it evolved from classical rhetoric, on the other hand, are not as individually sterile as classical rhetoric where knowledge is viewed as

something separate from the individual. Knoblauch and Brannon identify modern rhetoric with "'composing process,' 'writing-as-learning,' 'coherence,' and 'revision'" (5). These distinctions parallel the process-oriented approach where the text is the student's experience, where writing is not formulaic, and where topic sentences, and surface errors are lower order concerns. So, there is no longer the ancient epistemological context of "knowing about"; there is an epistemological shift, from "knowing about" to "knowing that." Rhetoric is now viewed as a means of knowing. Personal writing is one vehicle which facilitates that means.

These distinctions lead me back to my questions: why is there a distinction between classical rhetoric and modern rhetoric in pedagogical theory and in practice? Can there be a merging of one rhetoric into the other in the teaching of composition? The answer is no; there can be no smorgasbording of the process and product approaches (Knoblauch and Brannon 15). This merging will not occur because there is truth to what Connors says: "The question of personal writing is uncomfortable for many teachers because it presents such a clear mirror of one's individual philosophy of education" (181). Knoblauch and Brannon support the divergence: "The two approaches are incompatiable because they assume opposed philosophical premises (16). Both philosophies reside in a "deep level of intellectual perspective and instructional purpose" (16). A merging of the two approaches in a composition classroom is best summed up by Knoblauch and Brannon as they claim:

> The teacher who tells students that writing is exploratory, full of false starts, dead ends, and new directions, and who recommends free writing and journal keeping, but who simultaneously insists on formal outlines and requires only single drafts of essay assignments is working from confused pedagogical goals. The teacher who encourages students to 'think for themselves,' to take risks in their writing in order to discover new significance, but who then faults their subsequent discourses mainly for tense shifts and spelling errors is delivering contradictory messages. (16)

The contradictory message is that form is more important, that ideas are not conveyed if there are grammatical and mechanical errors.

So there are two composition philosophies from which a teacher can choose: the product-centered approach where students are asked to develop a five paragraph theme using various "methods of development" imitating classical rhetorical arrangements; and the process-centered approach where students are asked to explore their views through writing as a means of knowing.

But these two philosophies cannot be the only reasons as to why personal writing is lacking in current-traditional composition courses. Connors unemotionally mentions the following literacy advocates' testimonial: ". . . students' writing is threadbare because students simply don't know

enough about their culture to say anything beyond their own experience" (180). My reaction to that ironic statement is, who does and who can know anything beyond their own personal experience? Students create the culture by being active members within it. To say that the culture is separate from the individual is to maintain the classical rhetorical stance that knowledge is outside the individual. Classical is something this stance may not be. E. D. Hirsch holds a similar 1990s view. His book, Cultural Literacy, encourages the "back to basics" philosophy in an attempt to cure cultural illiteracy because students fail to know the facts of the objective world in which they live; therefore, they MUST know these forms of discourse and search for those truths. The teaching philosophy of this rhetorical, product-oriented style is justified because it prepares each individual student to be able to contribute to the society, but actually, the contribution is only to decrease the number of people Hirsch would deem culturally illiterate.

Connors's philosophy statement forces me to react for a number of reasons. My answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper establish my philosophy which began during my two year graduate assistantship in a Writing Center. So many of the students came in for grammatical assistance, often required by their instructors. The once white colored typing paper looked like a battlefield where comma splices, semi-colons, and periods shot it out for their "correct" placement on the page. Maps were drawn with arrows as to where these essential writing tools belonged, while the

students were lost in grammar jargon such as pronoun-antecedent agreement, relative clauses, subordinate clauses, diction, etc. My job as the graduate assistant was to bandage the comma splices, semi-colons and periods and place them where they belonged, while the student just sat there next to me totally bewildered and disgusted. Often I would hear, "I really used to like to write; I guess I'm not a good writer," or "She didn't even pay attention to what I said in the paper."

Most of the students' papers were five paragraph themes; some voiced a controlled opinion while others had no "voice." Nevertheless, their writing experience was stifled. Most disturbing to me, although the frustrated students who could not express personal views was enough, was that most of those instructors did not permit their students to come in to the writing center BEFORE their final copy was typed and handed in; the instructors wanted to be the first who responded to their writing, something they did not even do. They responded mostly to grammar and mechanics. I wondered what it was that made these instructors distrust their students' expression.

Moving from my assistantship days to adjunct faculty appointments I, once again, experienced the stalking notion of the "student who cannot write, so therefore, must be dumb" attitude. This time I was hearing how other English faculty members "appreciated" their students' writing in the faculty lounge or, as I call it, "the pit of wit." In all three college lounges I heard, "The students in my writing classes are so stupid. I had them do a comparison/contrast paper, and

I get papers that are so superficial. I hate teaching freshman comp." That is such a classic statement in many ways. What exactly is responsible for perpetuating such anti-intellectual statements toward students who are, first of all, the reason these faculty are employed.

A self-fulfilling prophecy is operating here. Instructors will receive superficial writing, which is not an indication in any means of the intellectual ability of any student, if they assign a structure that is artificial itself. Once they get what they ask for, they complain; but most of all, they then generalize to say that very few students are good writers. I would like to see a publishing English faculty member submit a thoughtful piece of writing to a journal using the five paragraph theme. Instructors obviously know that their own voice and message cannot be contained within an artifically imposed structure. They also know that when they are inspired to write, on a topic of their own interest, by the way, they do not sit down and say, "Well, I think I'll use the comparison/contrast mode to get my point across." Why do teachers impose this upon their students? The rhetorical modes rear their own heads in any paper while the paper is in its process of becoming and of making meaning.

So, what is my philosophical stance? Writing students should be able and encouraged to explore what it is that makes them who they are; they should be inspired to create their own forms, find their own voice to know themselves through each writing experience. The instructor who creates a personal informal atmsophere in the classroom, by also sharing personal

writing, will . ture student's self-expression because students will take risks, explore and share themselves in an informal atmosphere more than a rigidly structured one. Until the classroom becomes their community, will they want to trust others to their expression and ideas.

Teachers already impose their classroom structure, but to structure a writer's voice to a formula forces the writer to stand outside its expression. And maybe it is a personal "revealing" intimidation as to why personal writing is uncomfortable for many teachers who can also learn from their students because students do have more than merely "something" to contribute. Opening up a classroom for personal expression puts students on an equal footing, whereby the instructor is no longer the true authority of expression, and the classroom is no longer teacher-centered.

This philosophical use of personal writing in a classroom encompasses more than personal writing. Opening up a classroom for personal expression puts students on an equal footing, whereby the instructor is no longer the true authority, the one who "pours knowledge into the emptied vesseled head" of each and every student, willing or not. Students are also an authority of reality. All of these dependent features establishes a non-threatening, authorative classroom structure and eliminates the teacher-centered classroom; it empowers the students to be the ones responsible for their learning, an idea which runs counter to the traditional method of teaching. Unfortunately, for some teachers, this philosophy is very threatening for themselves, for their view

of their students, and for their view of education.

Works Cited

Berlin, James A. "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories." In The Writer's Sourcebook. Eds. Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. 47-59.

Connors, R. J. "Personal Writing Assignments." College Composition & Communication May 1987: 166-183.

Faigley, Lester. "Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal." College English October 1986: 527-542.

Knoblauch, C. H. and Lil Brannon. Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing. New Jersey: Boynton/Cook, 1984.