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ABSTRACT

Writing in Western culture requires mastery of both rhetorical theory and the expressive writing often promoted in composition studies, however great the conflict between them might be. The tension between these two poles can even be a source of excitement and motivation. Landmark composition studies such as those of James Britton and Janet Emig stress that expressive writing is typically the first stage of the writing process since it is least demanding and most freely accomplished by inexperienced writers. While students are becoming accustomed to the ways in which content, persona and audience play into all forms of writing, they might be asked to write for a range of readers, beginning with those less threatening, such as a group of 10-year-olds or high school students or a close friend or relative. Peter Elbow proposes that teachers of writing familiarize students with the characteristics of academic discourse as an appropriate way of showing them how to write for a particular audience. He further suggests that teachers make students aware that different disciplines may represent different audiences. Rhetoric is a means of explaining the difference between expressive writing, academic writing, and writing done outside the university, while admitting the legitimacy of all these types of writing in appropriate situations. (TB)

Virginia L. Chestek

Rhetoric and Composition: A Necessary Tension

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Last year in a freshman critical reading and research course, one of my students complained about a low grade on the first paper assignment, which asked students to explicate one of the readings in the first unit by explaining a connection between some idea in the reading and a personal experience. The audience was myself and other members of the class. I explained to the student that while his ideas were good, he had brought up each of them only to drop it without developing it and shift to another one, losing the focus of the paper. Also, he had made a series of sassy and comical remarks inappropriate to both his subject and audience. A smattering of technical mistakes did the rest of the damage.

When I asked him about his background in writing, he said he had transferred from another college where his comp course had required him to write his thoughts informally in a notebook all semester. The instructor would then read the notebook and comment on his ideas. He had received a B+ in the course, and he had a lot of trouble understanding why I would downgrade his paper. A political science major who expected to write many papers during his college career, he was a conscientious student who came to class prepared and produced preparation materials and rough drafts for peer reading.

This student's dilemma is emblematic of the tension between rhetorical theory and current composition studies as I see it. In recent years, research and theory in composition has often concluded that students' writing potential has been severely limited by instructor assignments which ignore expressive writing and force

students immediately into logical, well-organized, audience-based essays (see Fmig, Britton, and Elbow Teachers). At the same time, the final drafts of most writing in the university and in the workplace continue to be judged rhetorically, according to just these principles. I believe successful writing in western culture requires mastery of both rhetorical theory and the expressive writing often promoted in composition studies, however great the conflict between them. The tension between these two poles can even be a source of excitement and motivation for students.

Aristotle's theory of rhetoric remains in the twentieth century the clearest and most comprehensive schema for understanding effective writing. Its breakdown of communication into the three interrelated elements of persona, content, and audience in the rhetorical triangle forms the basis for Kinneavy's 1971 model of the types of discourse in contemporary writing. In this model, persona is the basis for all expressive writing, including diaries, journals, prayers, minority protests, religious credos, and manifestoes. Referential writing such as diagnoses, scientific theories, textbooks, and newspaper reports is a function of content, while the persuasive writing so familiar in advertisements, political speeches, and religious sermons entails a heavy focus on audience. Kinneavy places literary writing between referential and persuasive, suggesting that short stories and novels as well as television shows and movies are geared to audience reaction as well, though with an added effort to entertain and to create unusual verbal structures (Ch. 1).

What is most impressive about Kinneavy's acceptance of Aristotle's rhetorical triangle as the basis for categorizing twentieth century writing is his extensive review of theories of language functions formulated since ancient times by philosophers in the liberal arts tradition, sign theorists, educators, comparative philologists, and other analysts of writing and communication before developing an essentially Aristotelian theoretical framework. He concludes that while Aristotle's persona, content, and audience may be called by other names, all three elements are nonetheless present in any writing situation (Ch. 2).

More recently, Robert Scholes in a 1991 article argues that in current western culture, knowledge of rhetoric is crucial to students who will be bombarded with media persuasion from television, movies, newspapers, magazines, and advertisements all their lives. Through the sophisticated visual enhancements made possible by modern technology, verbal persuasion is now far more powerful than it was in Aristotle's day. However, analysis using Aristotle's principles of rhetoric can unveil such contemporary media manipulation as the continued representation of women as sexual objects in film, which tacitly persuades viewers to accept this limited definition of women (771). Aristotle himself lists self defense as one of the four uses of rhetoric, which also include a commitment to truth and justice and an ability to see both sides of a case and to refute unfair arguments (Ch. 1).

Scholes points out that since rhetoric is a collection of methods rather than texts, with texts used as examples, rhetorical

study could also mediate the current ''great books'' debate. He maintains that even the strongest proponents of western thought would not have celebrated the ideas in selected texts without acknowledging the conflicts between texts themselves and the conflicts between texts and history. Rhetorical study, with its acceptance of contingent issues to which there is no clearcut answer, over which educated people disagree and debate, promotes comprehension and analysis of various dissenting texts rather than exclusive adherence to the ideas of a select few (763-767).

Wayne Booth argues that all truly admirable writing has a distinct rhetorical stance -- the subject is logically argued, the audience is shown some consideration, and the persona of the writer suits the subject and audience. Booth admits his own lack of success as a teacher when giving writing assignments without rhetorical purpose or clear sense of audience; papers were poor even though grammatical, well organized, and free of spelling errors. In his own writing development, he points to a breakthrough when he was writing a paper on a topic to which he was deeply committed and received honest feedback from a professor who insisted on his right to respond as an audience. Others have similar stories; newspaper reporters learn from their editors and readers, while graduate students learn from their dissertation directors (153-154).

Booth argues as well that without instruction,''we are more inclined to the perversions of rhetoric than to the rhetorical balance'' (157), noting like Kinneavy that students in writing

courses practice rhetoric every time they write a paper whether they know it or not. They try to generate some type of significant content, and they try to persuade us (the audience) that this content makes sense and that they are credible and believable (persona). When we give them poor grades it is because they have done this awkwardly and poorly, which we could correct by showing them the underlying principles of effective persuasive writing developed by Aristotle and still operating in contemporary writing.

Rhetoric conflicts with current composition studies favoring process in that it posits a particular process of writing that can deny individual student writers the means of beginning at their own level and discovering their own writing processes. Many composition researchers and theorists contend that students write badly because they are always faced with authoritative rules for writing which don't work for them and frequently stifle their ideas so they can't write at all.

Landmark composition studies such as those of Britton and Emig stress that expressive writing is typically the first stage of the writing process since it is least demanding and most freely accomplished by inexperienced writers, yet rule-based writing instruction has always ignored this. Elbow has been one of the most influential proponents of expressive writing, contending in his book Writing without Teachers that putting ''the wrong meanings in the wrong words'' is a necessary first stage in the process of developing a thesis and its logically related content, and students

may not be able to reach their meaning in any other way. Further, expressive writing helps develop a forceful voice (Ch. 2).

Composition theorists' the call of for a highly exploratory component to writing instruction which welcomes any and all of a student's ideas in academic writing opposes any authoritative, product-based system of writing, including Aristotle's, because this type of formalized system creates a barrier the beginning writing student cannot successfully negotiate. As David Bartholomae argues, the student must feel herself bold enough to ''invent the university'' every time she writes a paper. She may face a still greater struggle if she feels she must bridge the gap between her own ideas and Aristotelian rhetoric as well.

However, Bartholomae also points out that as teachers we need to recognize that the student who is successful in academic writing will eventually learn to operate at the intellectual level of the university as well as follow its conventions (134-135). Similarly, Mike Rose notes in his 1989 book Lives on the Boundary that students in his tutorial programs ''needed to be immersed in talking, reading, and writing, they needed to further develop their ability to think critically, and they needed to gain confidence in themselves as systematic inquirers. They had to be let into the academic club'' (141). As writing instructors, we cannot eliminate the struggle the student faces between her own ideas and the conventions of academic writing, but we can make it an interesting struggle as well as one the student can potentially win.

Aristotle's rhetoric does not privilege the academic audience; in fact, for him persuasive writing functioned primarily in the public domain outside of the university. Contingent issues worth debating might easily be as mundane as who vandalized the local high school and how this might be proved. Students can be introduced to the concept of a contingent issue on this level, as well as with more controversial public issues such as ''Should Tonya Harding be allowed to skate with the U. S. Olympic team in Lillehammer?'' To register an opinion, students need to explore their own ideas, values, and feelings as well as generate a thesis and support, and this can serve as a basis for more intellectually complex issues they will later explore and research in their own discipline.

Beginning students can be asked to assume various audiences in their writing, starting with less threatening audiences with whom they can feel comfortable and knowledgeable. In these kinds of rhetorical situations, an expressive persona is appropriate and even enhances the final product. For example, students can write on serious topics to an audience of ten-year-olds or high school students who genuinely don't know as much about it as they do. Or they can use a close friend or relative as an audience, which gives them a greater personal stake in relating their content clearly and persuasively. Audiences in writing assignments can become progressively more formal to include members of the writing class, the instructor, employers, government officials, the U. S. Olympic

Committee, etc. Each audience requires adjustment to an appropriate rhetorical stance.

Elbow suggests in his recent article, ''Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues,'' that we should teach a series of discourse variations, alerting students to ways of adapting messages to various audiences. He proposes familiarizing students with characteristics of academic discourse such as thesis and support, clear structure, somewhat formal wording, avoidance of personal pronouns, etc. as an appropriate way of writing for an academic audience. And he suggests letting students know that teachers in different disciplines represent different audiences. For example, he describes bringing into the writing classroom a sociology professor, who shows the class one of her writing assignments and discusses her expectations about student papers.

Rhetoric is a means of explaining the difference between expressive writing, academic writing, and writing done outside the university while admitting the legitimacy of all these types of writing in appropriate situations. It can be presented as our best example to date of a writing process that has led in many cases to successful written products. Further, it can be presented insuch a way that the student recognizes it is her own persona, content, and relationship with the audience that drives her writing, not Aristotle's. She can learn to adapt the system to her own needs. This demands both her knowledge of the principles of rhetoric and

experiments with her own process of writing, however great the tension between these two poles.

I'm going to close by finishing the story of my irate student with the bad grade and the semester notebook full of good ideas. He stayed in my course, he worked well in peer groups, I made him read some rhetorical theory, he wrote three more papers based on analyses of assigned texts and library research, and he received an A as a final grade. I think he did some struggling to balance his freely expressed but initially formless ideas against the rhetorical conventions of academic writing, but he needed both to be taken seriously as a writer and thinker at the university level.

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