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ABSTRACT

According to a recent article by Richard Fulkerson, there is some consensus among those who teach writing about what makes writing good. Apparently, a growing number of writing instructors' aims constitute what Fulkerson calls "rhetorical axiology." Rhetorical axiology is a belief system in which teachers value highly "overall rhetorical effectiveness" in writing, or "audience awareness" or persuasiveness. According to Fulkerson's scheme, a rhetorical axiologist is a person who sees writing not as above-all-else formal or above-all-else expressive or above-all-else accurate--but a person who sees writing as a social, communicative transaction rather than as a solitary, expressive act. Rhetorical axiology stresses writing as a social transaction, an attempt to enter (and perhaps change) a "discourse community," a community in which writers have established and accepted certain premises, assumptions, conventions, and have valued and privileged certain kinds of evidence, certain kinds of research, and certain kinds of texts In the classroom, however, rhetorical axiology carries with it some hazards. In his effort to ensure that students' products are rhetorically impressive, an instructor often finds that his role in the collaborative classroom usurps that of his students. In one class, the instructor found that his role as coordinator of a collaborative research paper extended far beyond what was needed; more recently, he has allowed the students to coordinate the effort and results have been much more satisfying. (TB)

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Theoretical Freedoms, Practical Successes

According to a recent article by Richard Fulkerson in College Composition and Communication, there is, surprisingly, some consensus among our aims, in our beliefs in what makes writing good, if not our methods. Apparently a growing number of writing instructors' aims constitute what Fulkerson calls "rhetorical axiology." Over the past 20 years, some writing teachers have held to an axiology of "formalism"--a valuing of correctness at paragraph, sentence, word, and sign-level. Others have held to "expressivism"--a valuing of personal expression and development of an individual voice in writing. And still others to "mimeticism"--a valuing of the factual accuracy of information divulged in writing.

But the "consensus" that Fulkerson sees in our discipline, **rhetorical axiology**, is a belief system in which teachers highly value "overall rhetorical effectiveness" in writing, or "audience awareness," or persuasiveness. According to Fulkerson's scheme, a rhetorical axiologist is one who sees good writing not as above-all-else formal or above-all-else expressive or above-all-else accurate--but one who sees writing as a social, communicative transaction rather than as a solitary, expressive act.

Fulkerson asserts that rhetorical axiology is now the dominant "axiology," or belief system of what makes writing good, given the "consensus" he finds expressed in recent theoretical treatises, in textbooks, in books on pedagogy, and in scholarly articles in journals. Many of these stress writing as a social transaction, an attempt to enter (and perhaps change) a "discourse community," a community in which writers have established and accepted certain premises, assumptions, conventions, and have valued and privileged certain kinds of evidence, certain kinds of research, and certain kinds of texts. A biology major, this axiology assumes, should learn to write like a biologist, for only then can he or she actively engage in discourse of the community of biology professionals; the same goes, of course, for an English, paralegal, or social science major.

Fulkerson goes so far as to suggest briefly that this is a "whatever works" belief, yet to do so is to undervalue the work done in and out of the classroom to achieve rhetorical effectiveness. In my work, the act of "teaching writing well" is often synonymous with "students writing well," and I subscribe to that rhetorical axiology. I too believe that good writing is not necessarily defined by its formal features, by its level of expression, or by its accuracy of information. In short, like many of my peers, I want to be neither a formalist nor an expressivist nor a mimeticist. Though I don't ignore the formal features, the level of expression, the accuracy of information, they are not valued nearly so highly as is rhetorical effectiveness.

And certainly it makes sense to value, even to demand rhetorical effectiveness from writing students. We do so for a number of reasons:

1) it seems logical and humane to teach by having students succeed at tasks rather than by having them fail; quite simply, I prefer (and encourage, demand, and mandate) that my students prove their competence and/or mastery by writing what I define as "good--rhetorically effective--writing."
2) Like other writing teachers, I demand rhetorical effectiveness for students' pride, grades, satisfaction, indeed in some cases possible publication.
3) Like other writing teachers, I demand rhetorical effectiveness for my evidence and documentation of an ability to teach effectively;
4) And like other writing teachers, I demand rhetorical effectiveness at least in part because of the academy's increasing concern with "outcomes-based" education.

I suspect also that one of the reasons the emerging consensus of rhetorical axiologists exists is because we find, as a whole, a formalist axiology too restricting, an expressivist axiology too "touchy-feely," a strictly mimeticist axiology too impossible to adhere to. And that we may find that a rhetorical axiology lends itself well to collaborative workshop pedagogy. Yet when putting their beliefs into practice, rhetorical axiologists can find themselves faced with the same dilemmas posed by other axiologies.

To ensure that the products of my students' collaborative writing and learning processes are rhetorically impressive, I often find that my role in the collaborative classroom usurps

theirs. In my zeal to see my axiology reached, I can too easily and frequently take measures that restrict students' freedom and their construction of knowledge as they practice the writing process--despite the fact that such measures are designed to yield effective writing.

A brief example of this: In a "Writing-from-Research" classroom of mine (the second of two required freshman writing courses), my students worked in groups of three-to-six to produce a collaboratively authored research paper. I've often found that my role as "coordinator" often included not only designing the assignment, setting deadlines, forming groups, and suggesting topic choices and divisions of labor, but also included helping analyze potential audiences, providing lists of useful research sources, suggesting possible organizations of material, assisting with documenting sources, and--when some groups and individuals lagged in their work--giving pep talks, mediating personality disputes, penalizing "shirkers" and praising hard workers. And, furthermore, solving for the groups other problems of logistics, of research, of writing, and of arrangement.

What I truly wanted them to see was that writing is a collaborative social transaction, not a solitary act of expression, and that the result of such a "transaction" could be, was likely to be, a rhetorically effective "product." Yet in essence this became a power issue: in efforts to empower my students by "enabling" their success at a task, I assumed, in my pursuit of "rhetorically effective writing," too much of the responsibility for the process that should be theirs.

What many learned was much about how to follow a preconceived timetable, and little about writing as collaborative social transaction in which writers--not teachers--should be discussing and solving problems of audience analysis, division of labor, of completion and value of research, of arrangement of material, of source documentation, of proofreading and editing, even of labor conflicts. As one of these students wrote in her course evaluation: "we didn't really collaborate--we were too busy trying to do what you said."

In more recent classes, I've made some changes, all of them designed to give students more space, more "freedom" to collaborate. I still wrote the assignment and made the due date, but in between, the only "tasks" I took upon myself were to 1) arrange for an hour of class time each week for the groups to collaborate and ask questions; 2) answer all of their questions; and 3) ask for "minutes" and "plans" for their work. I should note too that these students are not inexperienced. They were near the end of their very last required college English course, working on one of their last assignments, one of a few research papers written during the quarter.

As a result, when faced with a task like "choosing what research to do," rather than being told by me, the groups had to analyze and discuss a published research essay similar to their own, and then make their **own** decisions about what research to do and how to do it.

These students proved themselves capable of this task and of many more, even if the ultimate results of their work were not as

consistently what I'd call "rhetorically effective" as their writing may have been under other circumstances. In other words, I could have "enforced" the kind of work necessary to ensure rhetorical effectiveness, yet chose not to, at the risk of their product being less effective.

These subsequent students, who took more of the responsibility of writing, collaborating, and learning benefited in ways I had not anticipated:

1) they were posed a problem, and they solved it, in the process, taking ownership of the task and its product;
2) they solved problems in ways I would not have anticipated, nor in some cases, even recommended, but in some instances the result was more rhetorically effective work;
3) they "learned" that writing, indeed collaborating, even learning, is not a matter of following a preconceived and well-ordered set of instructions mandated by an authority figure, but a matter of weighing alternatives and making informed choices, and a matter of taking responsibility for the results.

In summary, my point is that practices designed to encourage rhetorically effective writing can all too often restrict students' ability to construct knowledge.

And I'll conclude--and turn the discussion to Gary Eddy--by asserting that students have as much space as possible to to solve for themselves and by themselves any such problems that they can be deemed reasonably capable of solving.

The litmus test, I think of any classroom task may be to ask NOT "who is most qualified to perform this task?" For the answer there is all too often the teacher. The question, rather, should be instead "Who will benefit from having attempted this task?" The answer to that question, of course, is our students. You may remember the Coles/Vopat collaboration of seven years ago entitled "what makes writing good." At least as important, however, as the rhetorical effectiveness of student writing is the **authorship** of student writing; the issue may not be so much **what** makes writing good as it might be **who** makes writing good.