

Diverse Lessons (Undergraduate Program at Texas A&M)



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The number of first-year writing and writing-across-the-curriculum programs has been increasing at institutions across the United States, but a similar rise has not been seen in the growth of concentrations in rhetoric and writing as an undergraduate major or minor. As David Fleming noted nearly ten years ago in “Rhetoric as a Course of Study,” despite an upturn in scholarly attention to rhetoric generally, the effects of this increased attention have not yet been fully felt at the undergraduate level, where rhetoric has not re-established a presence as a “coherent and attractive course of study” (169). Since the publication of Fleming’s article, at many institutions, rhetorical study at the undergraduate level remains concentrated in first-year composition courses, and English department faculty members are still asking what an undergraduate program of rhetorical study might look like.

In this program profile, we describe how the Discourse Studies faculty at Texas A&M University has worked to develop a concentration in rhetoric that stretches across the undergraduate curriculum, offering the opportunity for undergraduate English majors and minors to select rhetoric as one of their areas of specialty. Students specialize in rhetoric by choosing to follow what is called a concentration in “Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture.” This profile addresses the emergence of rhetoric in the English Department’s undergraduate curriculum, discusses the faculty’s efforts to expand and revise course offerings for a rhetoric program that better draws on the teaching and research strengths in our department as well as the unique needs of our students, and finally, points to some of the challenges in assessing the program’s success.

History of Undergraduate Rhetoric in the English Department

As late as the early 1960s, Texas A&M was still a small military institute with an all-male student body, as well as the state land-grant college. Its long and distinguished tradition in agriculture and engineering formed the basis for what it would become when it opened its doors to nonmilitary students and women in the sixties: one of the state’s two “flagship universities,” a full-scale Research I school with a varied and diverse student body of 45,000 students (including a female majority) and a full complement of doctoral programs in various disciplines, including the liberal arts. Since the early 1970s, the English Department has grown from a unit that mainly provided service courses in composition and technical writing for engineering, agriculture, science, and business majors to a world-class research department with 750 majors and more than one hundred M.A. and doctoral students.

As happens at many universities, rhetoric and composition grew up at Texas A&M primarily as a service program at the undergrad level and a research specialty at the grad level. The opportunities to teach comp and tech writing on a regular basis and to help with the heavy administrative duties associated with the large writing program directed mainly to undergrad nonmajors contributed to the growth of interest among graduate students, who often moved from a specialty in literature into the study of rhetoric after good teaching experiences in the comp program. Literature dominated the undergraduate offerings and also predominated in the graduate program though demand was high enough among grad students to support a three-course sequence that provided the necessary background for thesis work in rhetoric. The courses—“History of Rhetoric to 1900,” “Modern Rhetorical Theory,” and “Contemporary Composition Theory”—were taught once a year on a regular rotation.

In 1989, an important shift occurred at the undergraduate level. To accommodate an increasing interest in writing among the growing population of undergraduate students, the faculty proposed to offer alternatives to a concentration in literary study. What emerged was a three-track undergraduate program. In addition to the Literature Track, which continued to be the main choice, students could opt to focus in Creative Writing or in Rhetoric.

Interestingly, the development of the Rhetoric Track was partly the result of some resistance among the majority group of literature faculty to the idea of offering an undergraduate specialization in expository or professional writing—the kind of program developing at that time in other universities. The faculty wanted to keep the growth of the program in check and keep the emphasis fairly traditional. In other words, the small group of rhetoric and comp professors found it easier to “sell” the idea of a rhetoric program. It seemed to fill a gap left by the departure of

speech communication, which had left English to form its own department only a few years earlier, a good deal later than the national norm for such divisions. As in the graduate program, three core courses were approved in the new concentration—"History of Rhetoric," "Modern Rhetoric," and "Rhetoric of Style." Students in the Rhetoric Track were still required to take a significant number of hours in literature, so the program seemed something of a compromise at the time.

As students came into the Rhetoric Track, however, many of us teaching in the program came to see its value. It proved a particularly strong option for pre-law students. If, as James Boyd White suggests, every lawyer is a "professional rhetorician" (4), we should not be surprised to find that a concentration in rhetoric backed by the study of literature and critical theory provides a preparation for law school every bit as good as the kind of preparation students might receive in a major in political science or some other social science. The law schools to which we recommended our students seemed to be especially impressed by the component of research and written communication that distinguished our program from rhetoric programs in speech departments. It was a good sign when one of our first graduates in the Rhetoric Track made law review at the University of Texas School of Law. Others found the Rhetoric Track good preparation for graduate school, teaching, and professional writing.

In the mid-1990s, we were able to convince our colleagues that our students would benefit by a more practical program in writing, that they were in fact already landing jobs in business and industry, and, as a result, we added a certificate and minor program in professional writing. The core rhetoric courses, which every professional writing student was required to sample, provided a strong theoretical and historical context for the student of technical writing and editing. Many students already in the Rhetoric Track also took the certificate in professional writing and went on to graduate programs in technical writing or to jobs in a wide range of fields.

The Rhetoric Track: Then and Now

In the 2005-06 undergraduate bulletin, the Rhetoric Track is described as meeting the needs of "English majors who wish to concentrate their studies on the theory and practice of written communication." The Track requires 15 hours of course work in the theory and practice of rhetoric and writing alongside 12 hours of literature courses and a senior seminar. (See [Appendix One](#) for a chart of course offerings and brief descriptions of the courses).

According to numbers provided by the undergraduate office, 18.7% of the English department's majors are enrolled in the Rhetoric Track, with 65.7% in literature and 13.7% in creative writing, and about 2% in a certificate program for teaching middle school. In addition, approximately 300 minors are pursuing a Professional Writing Certificate. These numbers reflect nearly 50% growth in the Rhetoric Track over the last three years, as the number of students has exploded from 91 majors in Fall 2004 to 135 during Fall 2006.

All students in the Rhetoric Track must take English 353 ("History of Rhetoric") and 354 ("Modern Rhetorical Theory"). Along with these two required courses, students can select from a variety of options in rhetoric, professional writing, creative writing, and literary studies. Regular rhetoric and writing course offerings include English 201 ("Introduction to Literacy"); English 210 ("Scientific and Technical Writing"); English 235 and 236 ("Creative Writing, Prose"; "Creative Writing, Poetry"); English 241 ("Advanced Composition"); English 301 ("Technical Writing"); English 320 ("Technical Editing and Writing"); English 355 ("Rhetoric of Style"); and English 461 ("Advanced Syntax").

To complete the Professional Writing Minor, students take 18 hours, comprised of the following courses: 210 or 301 ("Scientific and Technical Writing" or "Technical Writing"); 320 ("Technical Editing and Writing"); 353 ("History of Rhetoric"), 354 ("Modern Rhetorical Theory"), and 355 ("Rhetoric of Style"). Students who earn the Professional Writing Certificate must take 210 or 301 ("Scientific and Technical Writing" or "Technical Writing"); 241 ("Advanced Composition"); 320 ("Technical Editing and Writing."); and 355 ("Rhetoric of Style"), along with six hours of elective courses chosen from a list of courses offered in English and Communications. While the Rhetoric Track and Professional Writing Minor and Certificate Program overlap in many ways, they remain separate from one another, and the changes we describe below do not affect the Professional Writing Minor or Certificate Program.

New Directions

Beginning in the 2004-2005 academic year, as part of a response to the continuing growth of the undergraduate rhetoric program, as well as the need to prepare students for a diverse array of careers, the faculty responsible for teaching these rhetoric courses opted to change the name of the Rhetoric Track to the "Rhetoric, Writing, and

Culture Track.” Along with the name change, the faculty also began planning significant revisions to the major course offerings. In some ways, the revised program title offers a better portrait of the work that has *already* been going on in our teaching and research, and in other ways, it reflects new directions in which we see the program moving in upcoming years. We should note here that these revisions, while accepted by the RWC program faculty, have yet to be revised in the university’s course catalog and officially implemented in the English Department’s major program. In particular, the process of adding a brand-new course to the university catalog is a lengthy process, which we are beginning by offering the course (described below) for the first time in Fall 2007.

To reflect the current emphasis on writing and culture, classes traditionally listed as “surveys” in the course catalog (e.g., “History of Rhetoric”; “Modern Rhetorical Theory”) are now treated as more focused topical studies of significant issues in rhetorical study. This change calls attention to the ways that our courses can foreground the use and application of rhetoric to understand writing and culture, rather than surveying major figures or texts. Other courses in the program, such as the “Rhetoric of Style” course, will more explicitly address comparative and cross-cultural approaches to rhetoric and writing. A new 400-level capstone course, currently titled “Writing Culture,” which will ask students to treat writing in its fullest possible context, is also in development.

Writing is at the heart of the Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture Track, and all of the RWC courses are University “W” courses, or writing-intensive courses. We are also in the process of starting an annual essay competition for the best essay written in a Rhetoric or Linguistics course. These changes, we believe, promise a more cohesive program of study, one that will immerse students not only in the practices and processes of writing, but which will also prepare students to conduct more advanced study in rhetoric, to cultivate self-consciousness about their own uses of rhetoric and writing, and to explore the interrelationships between language and culture.

Theory Underlying Development of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture Program

One of the key assumptions underlying this program is that first-year composition does not have to be the only source for rhetorical theory and attention to writing. While Texas A&M’s first-year writing course is titled “Rhetoric and Composition,” students find it valuable to have these principles reinforced—and more deeply grounded—through further coursework in rhetoric and rhetorical theory. Offering a wide range of classes that facilitate students’ rhetorical development takes some of the burden off of the first-year writing course. Longitudinal research on students’ writing development (e.g., Herrington & Curtis; Carroll) has shown that writing skills develop over time, through continued reinforcement and involvement, precisely what our RWC program aspires to do.

We have also worked to draw on the strengths of our faculty in our program development. Taking into account the strengths that our faculty bring to the table means acknowledging a wide range of methodological and scholarly backgrounds, including linguistics, literacy studies, ethnography, rhetorical history, modern rhetorical analysis, and classroom discourse analysis, while at the same time recognizing that we all share a concern with how language and culture are intertwined, whether such study takes shape in historical, literary, rhetorical, or ethnographic ways.

As we work with students in this program, we have become convinced of the important role that rhetorical study can play for undergraduate students who go on to pursue a wide variety of professional and career options. The traditional “U-shape” of rhetoric concentrations—where it is highly studied at the freshman level and in graduate programs of study, but scantily represented at the mid to upper-undergraduate level—has resulted in a great deal of scholarship that looks at the influence that first-year writing can have on students’ subsequent writing, as well as a great deal of attention to graduate seminars in rhetoric. However, less is known about what an ongoing emphasis on rhetoric at the undergraduate level can contribute to students’ linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical self-awareness. We hope to see more and more programs reinvigorate their course offerings by providing greater attention to rhetoric throughout the undergraduate curriculum. We also believe that the interrelationships between cultural studies, literacy, and rhetorical study make for a powerful course sequence that can have an impact on students’ attentiveness to issues of communication and difference more generally at Texas A&M.

Assessment

One of the most significant elements of our program design has been the building-in of regular opportunities for ongoing assessment on multiple levels. In this section, we talk briefly about our efforts at designing an assessment program for our undergraduate rhetoric program.

In developing the Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture Track, the RWC program faculty created a set of ten outcomes that detail what we believe students should take away from our course sequence. These ten outcomes were developed collaboratively by the RWC program faculty, along with input from various colleagues throughout the English department, with an eye towards university and state educational objectives. These outcomes anchor a two-pronged assessment procedure: looking to understand how well students feel they are meeting these outcomes through their coursework as well as how well the faculty feel students' work meets the program's expectations. From these outcomes, we generated two rubrics: one for a student self-assessment (i.e. did students think their courses were helping them meet the learning objectives we set for the program?) and a second in which faculty would assess the work students produced (i.e. did students' work demonstrate their having met the program's learning objectives?). (See [Appendix Two](#) for the learning outcomes and [Appendix Three](#) for the two rubrics used in this assessment).

While many of us were comfortable with using rubrics in our own grading, it was something of an experiment to see how a rubric would work in assessing papers from one another's classes—but a successful one. At this point, we have completed a pilot assessment in each of the four core rhetoric courses currently being offered (201, "Approaches to Literacy"; 353, "History of Rhetoric"; 354, "Modern Rhetorical Theory"; and 355, "Rhetoric of Style"). For each course, all the students completed the self-assessment, and a team of three professors who were not teaching the courses read a random sample of ten papers and evaluated it using the collaboratively designed rubric.

Tentative results from the pilot assessment showed that students generally agreed or strongly agreed that the course fulfilled the learning objectives, with a slight downturn—a shift towards somewhat agree—for the learning objectives focused on methods, cultural awareness, and writing practice. The faculty review of student papers found a similar trend, with a shift away from strongly agree and agree for questions related to method, cultural awareness, applying principles to writing, and ability to argue, particularly in the "History of Rhetoric" and "Modern Rhetorical Theory" courses. One hypothesis for this shift has to do with the different kind of work that students do when the course is heavily slanted towards absorbing theoretical material.

These findings are promising with regard to our sense of the program's goals and how our courses meet those goals. However, they also point to some important areas for improvement. In particular, they suggest that, especially in our theory-heavy courses, we have more work to do in order to improve students' engagement with issues of cultural difference in their writing. The development of our capstone course ("Writing Culture") may provide one way of reinforcing for our students the role that culture plays in rhetorical performances.

Institutional Detail of Restraints Guiding the Program's Development

The restraints that guide the development of the Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture program are primarily institutional. The first constraint is the understaffing of the RWC Program, in no small part due to the administrative and other programmatic responsibilities the faculty have across the university, including work in the English Department's Writing Programs Office (which administers first-year composition as well as a required "writing about literature" course) and the University Writing Center.

A second, and closely related, constraint as the program develops is the continual need for the faculty involved with the program to meet a set of diverse needs within the English Department: RWC undergraduate course staffing, service in the Writing Programs Office and the University Writing Center, and scholarship and mentoring in the graduate Discourse Studies program. While many of these needs overlap, at times they pull in different directions.

If We Knew Then What We Know Now....

What have we learned through participating in this ongoing process? Perhaps the most important lesson addresses the way we talk about and integrate issues of culture, difference, and diversity into our courses. We recognize that this work needs to go beyond simply incorporating content that deals with cultural sensitivity and awareness, but our initial assessment findings have also suggested that this is an area where we can continue to improve. We need to incorporate into our courses experiences that engage students with one another as they address highly sensitive issues of difference and diversity. We have also learned the difficulty of talking about how to assess students' receptiveness to cultural difference. This was perhaps the learning outcome that we spent the most time discussing how to describe in a measurable fashion. Indeed, during student paper evaluation procedures, determining whether a

student “demonstrated a sensitivity to cultural differences” proved to be one of the more difficult rubric items to measure. This experience re-emphasizes for us the importance of continuing to talk about ways to make such concerns an ever-more central part of what we do—despite the fact that studying diverse rhetorical practices and cultural orientations to communication are at the heart of our scholarship and teaching. How well we engage our students in these pursuits is the real test of the program’s success.

Appendices

Appendix One: Current and Anticipated Formulation of the Undergraduate Rhetoric Program

Additions are in underlined and/or strong type. Deletions are in ~~stricken and/or emphasized~~ type.

Required Courses (6 hours)

- History of Rhetoric (353): ~~Survey based treatment of major thinkers and writers in the history of rhetoric, from antiquity to the 19th century.~~ **Topic-centered treatment of a major issue or set of issues in the history of rhetoric, with the aim of applying rhetorical principles to the study and practice of writing.**
- Modern Rhetorical Theory (354): ~~Survey based treatment of major thinkers and writers in late nineteenth and twentieth century rhetorical theory.~~ **Topic-centered treatment of a major issue or set of issues in modern rhetorical theory, with the aim of applying rhetorical principles to the study and practice of writing.**

Elective Courses in Rhetoric and Writing (9 hours)

- Approaches to Literacy (201): Treatment of the origins, functions, and philosophies of literacy with an aim of improving both the teaching and practice of communication.
- One of the following:
 - Scientific and Technical Writing (210): Principles of composition, rhetoric, and document design applied to the basic genres of research-based scientific and technical writing.
 - Technical Writing (301): A study of the processes of developing field-specific technical information related to the major, including researching, drafting, editing, revising, and designing technical reports, proposals, manuals, resumes, and professional correspondence for specific audiences.
- One of the following:
 - Introduction to Creative Writing: Prose (235): Initiation into the craft of prose fiction writing.
 - Introduction to Creative Writing: Poetry (236): Initiation into the craft of poetry writing.
- Advanced Composition (241): Focuses on the writing of advanced academic and professional prose; integration of computer technology in the analysis and production of writing.
- One of the following:
 - Technical Editing and Writing (320): Students learn to clarify, reduce, expand, and synthesize technical materials created by others, and develop techniques of audience adaptation, invention, organization, style, and mechanics.
 - Rhetoric of Style (355): A study of English prose style and the history of English prose through analysis and imitation of representative models of prose.
- Advanced Syntax and Writing (461): A study of approaches to language study, traditional syntax, perspectives on rhetoric and analysis of written discourse.

Capstone course (3 hours)

Writing Culture (400-level course): A capstone study of writing in its fullest possible context (currently in development; will be offered for the first time in Fall, 2007).

Other Requirements (15 hours)

4 courses in literary analysis and a senior seminar.

Appendix Two: Program Outcomes for Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture

By the end of the course, you (the student) should be able to apply your studies in the history and theory of literacy, rhetoric, and/or culture in the following ways:

1. Identify and demonstrate an understanding of key ideas, authors, and texts in the field.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of methods for studying texts and ideas.
3. Demonstrate an awareness of how cultural differences affect reading, writing, interpretation, and other forms of communication.
4. Apply methods and key ideas to the analysis or criticism of written texts, images, films, cultural practices, or other forms of communication and art from a variety of cultures.
5. Apply methods and key ideas to the improvement of your own writing and other communication practices.
6. Demonstrate an understanding of basic elements of communication; an appropriate competence in grammar, diction, and standard usage; and a willingness to revise and edit your papers as needed.
7. Demonstrate a general ability to interpret texts and construct explanations and arguments in writing (composing papers with a thesis, supporting evidence, appropriate documentation, and other elements of good academic writing).
8. Demonstrate creativity and critical insight in writing.

Appendix Three: Rubrics

Student Self-Assessment Survey

Strongly Agree / Agree / Somewhat Agree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree / Question Does Not Apply

1. In the course, I had the opportunity to study texts that improved my understanding of one or more of the following areas: literacy, rhetoric, and/or culture.
2. In the course, I had the opportunity to learn or practice sound methods for the study of ideas, authors, and texts.
3. The course increased or reinforced my awareness of the cultural differences in reading, writing, and communication in general.
4. In the course, I was able to apply what I learned to the analysis or interpretation of written texts, images, films, cultural practices, or other forms of communication and art.
5. In the course, I was able to apply what I learned to my own writing or communication practices.
6. In the course, I was able to demonstrate my effective use of basic elements of communication and to show my competence in grammar, diction, and standard usage.
7. In the course, I had the opportunity to revise and edit my papers as needed.
8. In the course, I have had the opportunity to show that I can interpret and construct explanations and arguments (composing papers with a thesis, supporting evidence, appropriate documentation, and other elements of good academic writing).

Faculty Rubric for Evaluating Course Papers

Strongly Agree / Agree / Somewhat Agree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree / Question Does Not Apply

From the evidence of this paper alone, the student seems able to:

1. Identify key ideas, authors, and texts in the field.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of these key ideas, authors, and texts.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the methodology used in the formal study of these ideas, authors, and texts.
4. Articulate a personal response to these ideas, authors, and texts.
5. Demonstrate sensitivity to cultural differences.
6. Identify key issues or principles of rhetoric, writing, and/or cultural studies.
7. Apply key principles to the critical analysis of written texts, images, films, cultural practices, or other forms of communication and art.
8. Apply successfully these key issues/principles to his or her own communication practices.
9. Demonstrate an understanding of basic elements of communication and appropriate competence in grammar, diction, and standard usage.
10. Interpret and construct arguments.

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