Try It, You Might Like It: On Teaching Rhetorical Theory and Criticism

Deanna D. Sellnow

Abstract: Students rarely question the relevance of most communication courses. For example, most students realize that courses focused on improving public speaking and interpersonal skills will benefit them personally and professionally after graduation. Convincing them that a rhetorical theory and criticism course is equally empowering can be a bit more challenging. This essay explores one approach for teaching rhetorical theory and criticism as uniquely relevant in the educational experience of communication students. By applying various rhetorical perspectives to artifacts that resonate with students' actual lived experiences, students become empowered advocates for positive change.

Communication teacher-scholars often cite ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, when teaching public speaking: "The audience is end and object of the speech." I argue that these words ring true for all teachers of communication, not just those teaching speech. We are only successful when our audience— our students—realize the value of the course content, understand the theoretical concepts and methods taught, and demonstrate appropriate use of them as critical producers and consumers of communication. I argue further that achieving these learning outcomes is absolutely crucial when teaching courses in rhetorical theory and criticism, courses that can otherwise seem abstract and irrelevant to undergraduate communication majors.

Deanna D. Sellnow, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL
CONTACT: deanna.sellnow@ucf.edu

Thus, I welcome this opportunity to share some of what I have learned over the years. In fact, what I have learned spurred me to write the book I use when I teach the course (Sellnow, 2018). The following paragraphs describe methods for teaching rhetorical theory and criticism courses organized in terms of foundations, content areas, applied assignments, and special issues to consider. Although these methods are not the only means by which to teach such courses effectively, they do outline one tried-and-true approach.

Foundations

The plethora of rhetorical theories and rhetorical artifacts from which to choose when developing a course in rhetorical theory and criticism is both deep and wide. Thus, the effective instructor of rhetorical theory and criticism does not attempt to teach everything but, rather, is selective in choosing those concepts and constructs that are most likely to resonate with students in achieving the goal and outcomes described in the previous paragraphs. In essence, the foundational course concepts and constructs should not (and, frankly, cannot) focus on covering as many theories as possible. Rather, the course foundations should address three primary questions: (1) What is the nature and evolution of the rhetorical tradition?; (2) What are the primary tenets of several rhetorical perspectives as they reveal what and how communication texts (e.g., oral, written, visual, multimodal) persuade receivers about what are "desirable/undesirable," "appropriate/inappropriate," and "normal/abnormal" beliefs and behaviors?; and (3) How does one conduct a rhetorical criticism regardless of rhetorical perspective or artifact? These three questions guide me as I prepare and deliver courses focused on rhetorical theory and criticism.

Content Areas

It is impossible to teach every available theory in a three-credit-hour 15-week course. Anyone who has tried to teach all the theories included in many of our communication theory and rhetorical theory books knows this fact all too well (e.g., Foss, 2018; Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2019; Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017; West & Turner, 2018). Thus, I shape the course around *rhetorical perspectives* and then highlight *representative theories* within each perspective. Representative theories can be introduced via the key content areas (rhetorical perspectives) of (neo)-Aristotelian, narrative, dramatistic, and critical (including neo-Marxist, feminist, cultural). (I also include units on musical perspectives, visual perspectives, and media-centered perspectives, although doing so is my own personal prerogative.) When addressing narrative perspectives, for instance, I credit foundational scholars (e.g., Walter Fisher/narrative). I also credit those that may have extended these ideas (e.g., Ernest Bormann/fantasy theme analysis) in ways that still highlight the ultimate goals of revealing an underlying "moral to the story" regarding how we "ought to/ought not to" believe or behave (Sellnow, 2018, p. 53). Similarly, students should discover that the ultimate goal for conducting a dramatistic analysis is to reveal underlying justifications for breaking society's "rules for living" (Burke, 1973, pp. 293–304). They should also leave the course realizing that critical perspectives (e.g., neo-Marxist, feminist, queer theories) reveal how texts operate as sites of struggle to reinforce or oppose taken-for-granted ideologies that simultaneously privilege some people and oppress others (i.e., othering). All students should complete the course with a solid understanding of these big picture concepts and goals of the variety of rhetorical theories embodied in different perspectives.

Applied Assignments

Three key assignments that can be integrated into any rhetorical theory and criticism course are: (a) group analyses, (b) individual analyses culminating in short papers and presentations, and (c) a final paper and presentation.

First, group analyses of the same artifact provide an opportunity to steer students in how to apply a given theory before they do so on their own. For example, during the first week of class, we watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas* together and discuss what it reveals generally from a neo-Aristotelian perspective, narrative perspective, dramatistic perspective, neo-Marxist perspective, and feminist perspective. Doing so provides an overview that helps students see that conducting a rhetorical criticism through various lenses (i.e., perspectives) reveals different messages and, thus, different potential implications on intended audiences. We then do more in-depth analyses using each rhetorical perspective as we move through the course. For example, when discussing narrative perspectives, we might examine a popular television advertisement (I find the Super Bowl advertisements a good place to start); when discussing a neo-Marxist perspective, we might watch an episode of a popular television sitcom. Sometimes I assign students to examine the artifact at home and complete a worksheet asking them to address the following:

1. Describe the rhetorical situation, including "speaker(s)," occasion, audience(s) exigence, and constraints. [description]
2. Interpret the text using the rhetorical perspective being examined. [interpretation]
3. Evaluate the text based on its potential impact on intended (and perhaps unintended) audiences. In other words, answer the "so what" (positive and/or negative implications on people and society). [evaluation]

By doing so, students begin by grappling with the text on their own but then expand their understanding as we work through an analysis of that text in class. I find this helps students gain confidence to then do so themselves in criticisms of a variety of artifacts.

Second, after working through each perspective via a group analysis/discussion, I ask students to apply each rhetorical theory to a rhetorical artifact/text of their own choosing by, again, following the same three steps: description, interpretation, and evaluation. Each student produces a five-page paper and 5-minute presentation. In doing so, students learn what each theory helps reveal when applying it to a text in the form of a rhetorical criticism as they deconstruct their own artifacts and expand their understanding of its utility as they listen to presentations by their peers.

Third, the semester culminates in a rhetorical criticism paper and presentation suitable for submission to a professional conference or academic journal (e.g., Sellnow, 2018, pp. 293–299). I encourage students to take one of their five-page papers and expand it into an 18- to 25-page formal paper and 10- to 12-minute presentation. Essentially, students develop an introduction (approximately four to six pages) that establishes relevance for examining the artifact. This requires them to develop a literature review regarding both the artifact and the rhetorical perspective they have chosen. The body explains the process (method) they underwent to examine the text and what they discovered (results). Essentially, this is what they did throughout the semester in the form of their short five-page papers and presentations. Finally, the conclusion (discussion) focuses on the social issue/problem or norm addressed in the text and an

answer to the "so what" question for audiences experiencing it, as well as future research questions arising to extend theory and our understanding of the issue or norm addressed.

The presentation should mimic an academic conference presentation. The introduction should be brief and the main points in the body should be each conclusion drawn (with evidence from the artifact to support each one). This way, the conclusion can be short. It can merely summarize an answer to the research question, answer the "so what" question, and point to future research.

In sum, using this scaffolding technique of application assignments breaks the formidable task of understanding rhetorical theories and applying them to artifacts in the form of rhetorical criticisms manageable for students being introduced to them for the first time. Of course, these assignments are not necessarily the only ones that can be effective; however, they have served me well in teaching the course over the past 30 years.

Issues to Consider

When planning to teach a course in rhetorical theory and criticism, I suggest paying attention to two key issues if you want to succeed in both motivating students to want to learn and helping them achieve the intended affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning outcomes we strive for in any course we teach. First, rhetorical theory and criticism should be taught together in one course if students are to achieve all of the aforementioned learning outcomes. A rhetorical theory course taught without also doing rhetorical criticism falls short in achieving behavioral learning and a rhetorical criticism devoid of theory cannot achieve cognitive learning of the theories that ground such analyses. Students need to grapple with both understanding the theoretical perspectives and their roots as well as applying them to various artifacts. Second, students ought to be afforded the opportunity to apply these theories to examine artifacts that *speak to* or *speak for* them. Thus, although I may address famous political addresses or historical speeches in my course, the crux is on popular culture texts (some historical and some contemporary). Moreover, students select their own texts for all papers throughout the semester. By conducting the course with these key principles in mind, students do achieve the goals of all three outcomes. They achieve affective learning because they see the value of the theories in revealing taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviors, as well as implications of ideological messages on audiences. They achieve cognitive learning because they study rhetorical perspectives and theories in ways that speak to their own lived experiences with texts that perpetuate daily life. They achieve behavioral learning because they apply theories to relevant texts in ways that push them to realize their powerful potential to persuade audiences.

Conclusion

Over the course of my career, I have had the opportunity to teach a variety of courses ranging from interpersonal and group communication to public speaking and research methods. Although I enjoy teaching each of them, I find teaching rhetorical theory and criticism particularly rewarding as I watch students discover the relevance of these theories as they reveal taken-for-granted as "normal" issues of empowerment and disempowerment. By the end of the semester, students realize that knowledge truly is power. Moreover, they realize that rhetorical theory and criticism is both relevant and empowering.

References

Burke, K. (1973). *The philosophy of literary form* (3rd ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Foss, S. A. (2018). *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice* (5th ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Griffin, E., Ledbetter, L. A. M., & Sparks, G. (2019). *A first look at communication theory* (10th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Littlejohn, S. W., Foss, K. A., & Oetzel, J. G. (2017). *Theories of human communication* (11th ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Sellnow, D. D. (2018). *The rhetorical power of popular culture: Considering mediated texts* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

West, R., & Turner, L. H. (2018). *Introducing communication theory: Analysis and application* (6th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.