

## INSTRUCTION IN RHETORIC: THE PRESENT STATE OF THE ART

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What must be faced about our current efforts in the teaching of rhetoric in North America is that by and large, rhetorical education is still founded on an incomplete notion of what rhetoric is and could be as a subject of study. Teaching rhetoric solely as the craft of composition omits a theoretical interest in the principles of communication. The result of this significant omission is two fold:

First, the social and cultural effects of rhetoric are not being addressed, nor are they being impressed on students learning to use language informatively and persuasively; second, rhetorical principles are being taught in isolation, with little or no explanation of the compatibility of rhetorical studies with other aspects of language study, most significantly, with the study of literature. The absence of underlying philosophical and interdisciplinary understandings of rhetoric in rhetorical education continues to isolate the practice of rhetoric as taught in composition classes from rhetoric as a body of theory that explores human response to language and the social relevance of persuasion. Our greatest challenge as educators in the field of rhetoric in the 1980's must be to continue the work of scholars such as Edward Corbett, Wayne Booth, James Kinneavy, and W. Ross Winterowd who have revitalized the teaching of rhetoric by reminding us of the importance of rhetoric as an art of communication first and as the mastery of technical skills second.<sup>1</sup>

The important work of Corbett, Kinneavy, and the many who have followed their lead in composition theory in the last twenty years has established an alternative to the narrow goal of teaching rhetoric as

technical competence in writing.<sup>2</sup> This alternative mode features a basic principle revived from the classical tradition: the nature of rhetorical discourse is constituted by the interplay of a speaker, an audience, an intention, and a text. The incorporation of this principle into numerous rhetoric texts in the last ten years has eroded the wholesale domination of the narrow, stylistic or skills approach to a small degree. However, if we are frank with ourselves, we must admit that the success of such movements to restore scope to rhetorical education remains vulnerable to failure as long as the majority of those teaching rhetoric in English departments are convinced that the teaching of rhetoric is a relatively uncomplicated matter of getting students to write thesis sentences and cause-and-effect expository paragraphs. This assumption, that rhetoric is a one-dimensional subject, represents the core of the problem; it perpetuates the tendency to teach rhetoric as a subject governing stylistic skills, and encourages the view that rhetoric is less significant and scholarly a subject than the study of literature and criticism.

The authority of the skills-oriented approach to teaching rhetoric has simply been overwhelming in this century. I would like to characterize the nature of this strictly technical approach by describing in some detail the contents of a sampling of rhetoric texts slated for university use over the last sixty years. Until the 1960's, the domination of stylistic, technique-oriented texts went virtually unchecked.

The teaching of rhetoric during the first quarter of the century relied on texts that defined rhetoric as "effective writing" and treated the following as central topics: 1) grammatical conventions; usage and spelling; 2) forms or aims of writing, defined as description, exposition, definition, and argument; 3) diction, sentencing, and style; and 4)

paragraphing.<sup>3</sup> These texts continued normative practices of the late nineteenth century by leaving out invention and treating only two of the classical canons of rhetoric, arrangement and style. The emphasis of texts from this period, and of the majority of texts in the next three decades, was on writing as technique. There is little marked change in the texts used between 1925 and 1950, except for increasing attention to the modes of organization (cause and effect, comparison and contrast, definition, and classification). We recognize in the "modes," a feature which first appeared in North American rhetorics of the nineteenth century as an inventional issue, the remnants of the classical topics of invention.<sup>4</sup> In the twentieth-century texts, these modes are presented as issues in arrangement, not as topics of invention. By mid-century, the forms of writing (exposition, argumentation, narration, and description) and discussions of unity, diction, and sentence structure comprised the standard content in rhetoric texts. Treatments of style were abbreviated to discussions of diction and sentence structure except for the occasional text that treated a limited number of the figures such as metaphor, simile, allegory, and allusion.

The substance of rhetoric texts in the early 1950's could be summarized by looking at The Prentice-Hall Handbook for Writers (first published in 1951) and James McCrimmons' Writing with a Purpose (1950).<sup>5</sup> Both of these texts have been reprinted a number of times in the last thirty years and remain widely used as standard texts in freshman English all over North America. These rhetorics are what I think as multi-purpose texts: the authors attempt to deal with all possible writing and research problems in addition to treating grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation. Major subjects for study in Writing with a Purpose are topic selection,

organization, outlining, paragraph structure, sentence style, and vocabulary. Similarly, the Prentice-Hall Handbook stresses selecting a subject, organization and development, and revisions. Both treat the research paper and the preparation of business letters as well.

The fact that texts like these two continue to be used so widely is the best evidence of how very standard such skill-based approaches to the teaching of rhetoric still are. Very contemporary examples of this approach can be seen in Sheridan Baker's The Practical Stylist (1983) and Winston Weathers' and Otis Winchester's The New Strategy of Style (1978). Baker's remarks sum up what I have been calling the one-dimensional view of rhetoric: "This is a rhetoric primarily for first-year English students . . . who have found themselves facing a blank page and the problems of exposition. . . . [T]he expository problems are always the same. Indeed, they all come down to two fundamental questions: one of form, one of style. . . . [W]riting well is writing with style" (ix). The very titles of these texts foreground the importance of style, which for Baker and Winchester seems to be a term that subsumes form, diction, vocabulary, and just about every other aspect of writing that can be defined as technique. The "writing well is writing with style" approach leads teachers and students alike to equate rhetoric with the study of stylistic and formal techniques and with a command of diction and syntax.

In the 1960's and 70's the formal stylistic approach to the teaching of rhetoric was challenged by two different camps; one I have already mentioned, those rhetoricians like Corbett and Kinneavy whose neoclassical texts and scholarship helped to redirect the teaching of composition toward a classical theoretical foundation.

The canon of invention and the importance of persuasive appeals were central to the concerns of texts like Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (1967), Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse (1971), and Winterowd's Contemporary Rhetoric (1975). The interdisciplinary focus of Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (1970) by Richard Young, Alton Becker and Kenneth Pike brought together psychology, linguistics, English, and classical rhetoric. What these texts provided was an example of the breadth that rhetorical education could have.

Such texts also served to encourage teachers of rhetoric to take a more process-oriented and interactional approach to the teaching of writing, emphasizing invention more and stylistic technique less. This approach to rhetoric has had a steadily growing following; more and more texts have appeared in the last decade which emphasize the author/message/audience relationship and the complex processes of invention. These texts have tended to add to rather than supplant the standard topics of diction, organization, and grammar by discussing topics such as 1) the writing situation, 2) the writing process, 3) the view of writing as creative problem solving, 4) writing for different audiences, and 5) the purposes and goals of writing. More recent texts of this kind include Patrick Hartwell's Open to Language, Maxine Hairston's Successful Writing, Richard Coe's Form and Content.

Texts generated by this movement to revitalize the teaching of rhetoric by restoring classical precepts and theoretical foundations advocate the traditional view of rhetorical discourse as communication about a subject of relevance to both speaker and audience. The interactional aspects of rhetoric feature prominently in this approach to teaching. A second camp that has taken issue with the narrow skills

approach to rhetoric has moved in a very different direction from the neoclassical group. I am referring to the orientation of texts such as Ken Macrorie's Telling Writing, Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers, William Coles's Writing as a Self-Creating Process, and Ann Berthoff's Forming, Thinking, Writing. These texts reject the stylistic definition of rhetoric, but they also eschew the classical concept of rhetoric as persuasive communication. Macrorie places a great deal of importance on the "felt experience" of the writer and the importance of writing as a process which defines that experience. Coles and Berthoff have taken writing as self-expression a step further by arguing that the composing act is a mysterious process of self-creation generated by the powers of the individual imagination. The absence of traditional materials and precepts in these texts amounts to more than simply leaving out any formal treatment of exposition and persuasion: it reveals that these authors are attempting to reconstitute the nature of our traditional pedagogical enterprise. A pedagogy that presents self-knowledge through language as a primary goal subjugates both pragmatic and communicative goals to the experience of self-creation. This move turns both stylistic aims and interactional goals for rhetoric on end. What constitutes the aims and skills of composing in these texts is completely redefined in an approach to writing that equates self-discovery with integrity and reinterprets the aim of writing as the process of becoming oneself.

Despite the obvious differences in the substance of these two groups' approaches to rhetorical education, at least one similarity does exist. These educators have attempted to move beyond the limits of narrow definitions of rhetoric, definitions that stipulate only technical aims for rhetorical education. Their efforts have given us manoeuvring room as well

as impetus to continue and expand the enterprise of educating teachers and students alike to the personal and ideological wealth implicit in rhetorical study. Most significantly, these developments in the teaching of rhetoric have begun to restore to rhetorical education a certain body of theory, theory that provides a context in which to answer those questions so central to the philosophical foundations of rhetoric:

- a. What is the relationship between language and thought?
- b. What is the function of communication within society, and what are its cultural obligations?
- c. How does the nature of human beings as psychological and social entities impinge on how we use language?
- d. What is literacy, and what are the obligations of educational institutions to its development?

If we are to re-educate, and if we are to eradicate one-dimensional definitions of rhetoric, we must continue to introduce considerations such as these into our rhetoric classes and into professional discussions of the aims and substance of rhetorical education.

I have argued that a one-dimensional definition of rhetoric is partially the result of absence of underlying philosophical foundations in rhetorical education, foundations which would lead us to expand our understanding of the goals of teaching rhetoric. I have also suggested that rhetorical education is further limited by being taught in isolation, with little or no explanation of how rhetorical principles are compatible with, say, the appreciation of literary works. This is partially the result of the general attitude in English departments that the teaching of composition is just so much practical busywork, while the true province of English studies is literature. Such a climate cannot help making rhetoric,

as an applied art, a subject of low status. However, the persistence of narrow stylistic or technical approaches to the teaching of rhetoric has also served to reinforce the opinion of those in English departments who already equate rhetoric with the study of stylistic structures alone.

By defining rhetoric as a formal or technical craft, we have implied that learning to write has little or nothing to do with aesthetics or criticism and certainly nothing in common with the study of literature. Efforts to reintroduce rhetorical theory into the teaching of writing may go a long way toward establishing a common ground between rhetorical studies and literary studies.

A theoretically viable approach to rhetorical education would stress the compositional elements underlying the structure of all texts and the conditions under which certain texts would be received. In other words, if we expand our notion of rhetoric appropriately, to include all issues implicit in discussions of what texts mean, how they are constituted, and how we get meaning from them, we move rhetorical studies into close conjunction with the study of literature. In addition, we go a long way toward restoring the interdisciplinary basis of the classical rhetorical model. Certainly the work of modern rhetorical theorists such as Kenneth Burke and Wayne Booth demonstrates that the rhetorical paradigm of author/text/audience is an appropriate interpretive format for analyzing all texts, whatever their genre. However, if modern rhetorical education has been slow to reincorporate the theoretical inheritance of the rhetorical tradition in teaching rhetoric, it has been even slower to reunite the processes of writing and reading, a reunion clearly called for by critics like Burke and Booth and by many composition theorists who argue that our pedagogy in rhetoric is one-dimensional in this regard as well.



What we fail to make explicit in rhetorical education is that the ability to understand and discuss what a text means implies an understanding of how that text is composed--and vice versa.

I have concentrated in these brief remarks on describing the current state of rhetorical education in departments of English. The displacement of all forms of one-dimensional definitions of rhetoric is crucial to developing comprehensive rhetorical education that can aspire to more than the caretaking of maintenance literacy. The key to effecting such a displacement on all fronts is the restoration of the theoretical and philosophical foundation appropriate to a comprehensive pedagogical approach to rhetorical studies.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The work of these rhetoricians revitalized rhetorical theory as well as composition pedagogy in the early 1970's by reintroducing classical principles to writing instruction and drawing new attention to rhetoric as the study of persuasive discourse in a social and cultural context. See Corbett, Kinneavy, and Winterowd.

<sup>2</sup> Significant contributions to this movement have also been made by Emig, Shaughnessy, and Young et al.

<sup>3</sup> See the following texts as examples of the rhetoric texts used in Canadian universities in the early twentieth century: Greever et al., Greenough and Hersey.

<sup>4</sup> A few nineteenth-century texts successfully competed with stylistic rhetorics in the 1850's. These texts focused attention on the classical canon of invention and presented the modes of writing as inventional processes for the composition of explanatory discourse.

<sup>5</sup> The 1951 edition of the Prentice-Hall Handbook for Writers is faithfully reproduced in later editions. See The Prentice Hall Handbook 7th edition.

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