

## FUNDAMENTALS OF COMMUNICATION: SPOKEN AND WRITTEN DISCOURSE

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Over the past decade, we have seen a steadily increasing concern about the writing skills of university students, and various universities throughout the country have introduced either tests or courses, sometimes both, in an attempt to improve the quality of students' writing. What I want to do in this report is to show how the experience of dealing with this problem has led to the introduction of a course in practical rhetoric at the University of Calgary.

The instructors who are developing and teaching this course are members of the Effective Writing Service, which was originally set up in 1976 merely to offer remedial instruction to students who failed the Effective Writing Qualification Test. Soon, however, instructors in the Service were seconded to the Department of English to teach the first-year credit half-course in composition. Our experience of teaching, both in the remedial classes and in the credit course, soon convinced us that there was something basically wrong with the standard approach to the teaching of composition. First, most of our students--whether or not they needed remedial instruction--had no sense of the art of writing as an accredited discipline in itself. They therefore had little respect for it; they almost despised us for teaching it and themselves for studying it. Nor had they much sense of writing as a purposeful communicative activity. Often they had no real purpose in writing, other than the wholly artificial one of meeting course requirements. This in itself prevented them from being committed to the task and interested in it and therefore they seldom wrote with real power. For many of them writing an essay was much like crossing

a minefield: it was a matter of dodging in and out of a great many arbitrary rules conceived with a view to preventing them from writing naturally. Above all, they had no real sense of audience--no recognition of the possible value and interest of their work. No one really wanted to read what they had written, least of all the professor who knew it all anyway and could therefore be relied upon to fill in their omissions and flesh out their arguments.

Students with such attitudes were naturally very difficult to teach. Our first task, then, was to find a way of changing those attitudes, and to do so we had first to change our own. In looking for fresh approaches--new and vitalizing attitudes, relevant to the demands of the 1970's and 80's--we came, predictably, upon Aristotle. We then began to teach our students, not about dangling modifiers and faulty predications, but about purpose, situation, speaker, audience. This approach effected a startling change: students who expected to be bored by a dreary repetition of rules they had failed to learn in Grade 5 suddenly realized that a new field was opening up before them. Of course, matters such as dangling modifiers could not be ignored, but they were dealt with in terms of rhetoric; they were related to the speaker's image and the audience's comprehension, and they therefore began to make sense.

But having had a taste of classical rhetoric, our students were hungry for more. Furthermore, they knew, as did we, that having passed the course in composition or the Effective Writing Test, they were still by no means proficient writers. Both instructors and students, then, were interested in a course in practical rhetoric--one which would allow a deeper understanding of principle and a better mastery of skills.

Our chance came when, in 1981, the Effective Writing Service was assigned to the new Faculty of General Studies, whose Dean was charged with developing new courses and programmes, particularly interdisciplinary ones. The Dean was already considering the possibility of offering a course in which writing skills would form a credit component. We were able to convince him that such a course would have a better chance of success if its content were specifically relevant to the acquiring of those skills. We were also able to demonstrate that rhetoric was par excellence an interdisciplinary study, and that a course in it was therefore particularly appropriate in the Faculty of General Studies. We were then invited to create such a course.

At this point we decided, for a number of reasons, to include primary rhetoric as part of the course. The very low level of oral articulacy among our students was not only a problem in itself; we believed that it affected their ability to write. And since the principles of rhetoric which apply to writing are also relevant, indeed, primarily relevant to speaking, we decided to try to develop both skills in the tutorial sessions following each of the two weekly lectures.

It took us over a year to generate the course, but it was finally accepted in December, 1982, and was offered for the first time in Fall, 1983. It is a second-year half-course, but is open to anyone who has completed the pre-requisite--which is the Effective Writing Requirement--and it has been taken by senior students and even by graduates. We have had students of all ages--I have had several in their sixties--and from most disciplines. Some have already had considerable work experience; others are just beginning their post-secondary education. The title of the course is Fundamentals of Communication: Spoken and

Written Discourse. It offers two weekly lectures of fifty minutes, each followed by a fifty-minute tutorial. Enrollment is limited to twenty-five. The course texts are The Oxford Guide to Writing by Thomas Kane and Principles of Speech Communication by Douglas Ehninger, Bruce Gronbeck and Alan Munroe, but these texts are used as resources; they do not define the course. Edward Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student is recommended reading, and instructors draw heavily on a number of modern rhetorics--for example Rhetoric: Discovery and Change by Richard Young, Alton Becker and Kenneth Pike.

Essentially, the course deals with the key concepts of speaker or writer, material, and audience or readers, and includes some discussion of medium. We consider each of these concepts separately, taking about a month of lectures for each, but of course the division is artificial and there is a good deal of overlap. In the first month we consider the sender of the message, the speaker or writer. First, we deal with ethos--that is, with authority and image--and its three Aristotelian elements: sound sense, high moral character and benevolence. This soon leads into a discussion of the varying importance of these elements in addressing different kinds of audience, and the uses of extrinsic and intrinsic ethos. Second, we study the speaker's or writer's responsibility to generate meaning, instead of merely stating facts. This matter ties in closely with the consideration of ethos, since most students who write material-dominated prose do so because they lack faith in their own authority.

A discussion of the material takes up the second month, and is concerned with inventio, dispositio and elocutio. We cover most of the classical topics under invention, not under development. Here we part

company with the writers of many modern rhetorics including, unfortunately, Kane, whose textbook we use. It is true, of course, that many of the topics can be used in development, but we believe that it is important to introduce some of them at an earlier stage of the writing process. Division, above all, is of crucial importance in invention, because it helps students not only to generate material but also to evaluate and qualify the thesis. It therefore introduces what is for many of them a new way of thinking and a new procedure in researching material: division shows them where the gaps in their knowledge lie and therefore serves to direct their reading.

Under disposition, we teach the various strategies and patterns of development and how their choice is governed by the speaker's purpose, the material itself and the nature of the audience. In particular, we consider the distinction between dyadic and triadic situations and introduce students to the Rogerian approach. We also include some discussion of the different techniques of transition required by written and by spoken discourse. The third part of rhetoric included in the discussion of material is elocutio. Here we consider particularly the rhetoric of sentences and diction, and some of the more important figures of speech. This is the most difficult part of the course for students since the discussion becomes fairly technical and requires some understanding of the terminology both of grammar and syntax and of rhetoric, neither of which is familiar to them. I try to introduce students to rhetorical terminology by finding instances of various figures of speech in their own writing throughout the term. I comment, "Good use of anaphora" or "Effective anadiplosis" beside certain passages. The typical student is delighted to

discover that he is already a rhetorician malgré lui, and some of his fear of the terminology disappears.

There remain the other two parts of rhetoric, memoria and pronunciatio. Memory we deal with hardly at all--though I had one student who had quite independently developed her own scheme, based on melody. Pronunciatio is taught throughout the course, in the tutorials and as comment on written assignments. The art of delivery thus receives constant attention. Students' mastery of it, both in speaking and writing, is usually inadequate to begin with. Although they must have met the Effective Writing Requirement as a prerequisite for the course, some of them still make gross and elementary errors in writing. Our policy is simply to refuse to accept an assignment unless it is reasonably free of such errors. We invite those students who genuinely need instruction to come to us privately for help, but in fact most of them do not need to. In-class assignments and the final examination serve as a check on those students who get other people to do their proofreading. So far as oral delivery is concerned, we use the earlier tutorial sessions for practice in speaking. At the beginning of the course, we bring in a guest lecturer, an expert in voice production, who gives us all some very useful advice. During the first few weeks of term, students are required to practise reading aloud, sometimes using their own scripts. They learn to correct mistakes in the use of tone, pitch and speed, and they study one another's deportment, use of gesture, and eye contact with the audience.

The third month of the course is devoted to a study of the audience, but here the emphasis shifts. Although we include a discussion of pathos, this third part of the course is really an introduction to defensive rhetoric and the art of refutation. At this point, we ask the students to

consider themselves not primarily as senders of the message, but as its receivers. After giving some instruction in identifying logical errors, we provide materials such as articles and letters to the local paper for practice in analysis. This is very popular with the students, and leads to heated discussions in class. As their final assignment, they are required to write a refutation of an article or letter which they themselves select. The most interesting of these came from a girl who chose to refute a letter she herself had written to the student newspaper the previous year. She had had no idea, at the time, of the logical errors she was committing and was horrified by what she had written.

The content of the course is perhaps open to criticism in that although we use the elements of classical rhetoric as a framework, we include under its major headings concepts which are not, strictly speaking, classical. However, the system works so well that we are reluctant to abandon it, and we believe that we conform to the spirit if not to the letter of classical rhetoric.

The application of the principles of rhetoric to the problems of teaching remedial writing has had results far beyond our original expectations. For many, if not all students, the recognition that the art of communication has a theoretical base, and should be taken seriously as an academic discipline, has led to their developing a genuine interest in the subject for its own sake, and a commitment to improving their skills beyond the remedial level.

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