

Where Rhetoric Meets the Road: First-Year Composition

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A while back, one of our doctoral students was planning his exam reading list. He'd had great success teaching our first-year writing course and serving as a mentor to new TAs and as the department computer webmaster. He had come to graduate school intending to specialize in literature. Consequently, he was a late-in-the game crossover to our department's Composition, Literacy, and Culture Ph.D. concentration and willing to do some independent work to fill in gaps and synthesize his new interests. He had recently taken a course in rhetoric in the Department of Communication and Culture, formerly known as Speech Communication. Imagine our surprise—albeit before he plunged into his reading list—when he told us that a direction he envisioned for his work involved connecting rhetoric to composition. Not exactly a new concept, we gently pointed out. (This was the same week my teenage daughter and I discussed the propriety of entertaining both male and female friends in her bedroom.) *Don't some things just go without saying??* Where did we go wrong? What did we forget to put in the curriculum?!

Finally I decided that if the rhetorical roots of our program's first-year writing curriculum are so overgrown as to be invisible to the new kids on the block, perhaps it is because, as Cheryl Glenn said in her reply to Krista Ratcliffe's e-mail, the field of rhetoric is now so "plastic" (qtd. in Ratcliffe), located in an ever-changing and sometimes embattled English Studies intersecting with postmodern theory, cultural studies, and critical pedagogy. When I entered the field of composition in the 1980s, thanks to people like Edward Corbett, Andrea Lunsford, and Win Horner, the connections to rhetoric, indeed, went without saying. The "rhetoric" shaping the freshman writing course familiar to our current graduate students *is* perhaps less recognizable *as rhetoric* than it was when I taught Kenneth Burke's "pentad" in first-year comp at the University of Washington and studied cognitive theory alongside Plato, Aristotle, Blair, Campbell and Whately in a graduate course on invention—all in the service of contrasting the writing process with the demon of current-traditional product.

We bought into what Susan Miller would later call the "neoclassical account" (*Textual* 36) of composition's historical beginnings in ancient rhetoric, which, reduced to mere style, fell into "decline," only to be rescued by (and the rescuer of) composition in the latter half of the twentieth century (*Textual* 38). We were recuperating this ancestry for the battle between "bad" prescriptive form-bound rhetoric and "good" student- and audience-friendly rhetoric. The rhetorical canon of invention, especially, as an activity that "might take place in writing itself," not just in the mind (Crowley 208), legitimized an arsenal that included, despite theoretical contradictions, composing strategies derived from creative writing, linguistics, and the results of cognitive-based empirical research—all directed toward managing, if not solving, "problems" in student writing. It was part of the mission to understand rhetoric's past, perhaps, so the evil product-centered practices "would never happen again."

If not one of the "rescuers," at least a fellow-traveler, C.H. Knoblauch, in 1985, elaborated on what a philosophical and historical knowledge of rhetoric had to offer "those who work in the

theory and teaching of writing" (27). Because it deals with "questions surrounding any study of language: the relation between language and the world, the relation between discourse and knowledge, the heuristic and communicative functions of verbal expression, the roles of situation and audience in shaping utterance, the social and ethical aspects of discourse," (27) and because it acknowledges its "intellectual heritage" as a built-in part of its struggle with epistemological questions, Knoblauch claims:

. . . rhetorical theory can help composition teacher-researchers locate their statements about *how* people compose within a framework of *why* they compose: what significance the activity has for their lives and for the life of their society and culture. In other words, it can help to place writing in a context of human values—self-expression, learning, reaching out to other people, preserving knowledge, conducting business, making laws, playing, creating works of art—the psychological, ethical, political, and aesthetic dimensions of language use that make it so encompassing a human enterprise. (27)

That passage forecasts rhetoric's interdisciplinary and public roles in the turn toward WAC, workplace writing, and service learning, but also retains the all-purpose self- and culture-affirming roles rhetoric still plays in some arguments for required first-year courses. In hindsight, I would say that in 1985 compositionists were less concerned with the practical implications of the talk in that passage (say, with actually retooling courses to enact rhetoric as civic participation, or reflect the perception of reality as rhetorical, i.e., constructed by language) than they were with the disciplinary pedigree rhetoric could provide composition. To claim that composition descended from ancient rhetoric, finally, does not make philosophers of language out of writing teachers as much as it gives comfort to the notion that, as Susan Miller says, there is a traditional privileged educational system in place with "a few who may 'speak' consequentially and the many who will be excluded both from making and from understanding complex discourse" (*Textual* 44). Of course, rhetoric's history has subsequently been "retold" and the tradition complicated (Jarratt; Glenn), even by some who were key participants in the rescue, including Andrea Lunsford, whom Krista quotes acknowledging on email rhetoric's male privilege (Ratcliffe). But rather than seeking explanation or revitalization of composition's status in classical rhetoric, we are better off, as Miller suggests, examining the "actual historical discontinuity with earlier curricula that composition courses embody" (*Textual* 44) and the "larger cultural agenda" (*Textual* 45) that makes composition possible. To insist on the narrative emphasizing composition's unfortunate fall from rhetoric perpetuates the separation of "high" literature from "low" "nonliterary writing by the unentitled" (*Textual* 54). As many have argued, the elevation of literature strategically depended on the degradation of rhetoric and composition such that composition's genealogy lies not within a unified rhetorical tradition but within the history of English studies as literature's "covered over other" (*Textual* 46). There is a lineage, all right, but these familial relationships are far more complex.

Jasper Neel maintains that "the study of literature knows itself through the exclusion of rhet/comp just as classical philosophy has always known itself through the exclusion of rhetoric and sophistry" (qtd. in Mailloux 24). Like Neel, I don't think the roots of composition instruction lie in ancient rhetoric so much as I believe that the prejudice against composition does. In the first part of the century, (*you know this story*) rhetorical analysis gave way to literary criticism (poetics) in the upper division of the college curriculum, while "rhetoric" in the lower division

came to refer to everything about writing—argumentation, modes of exposition, style and usage—taught not by specialists but by the new (and still existing) "composition underclass" (Connors 55) of instructors. We have to ask, when we ask what happened to rhetoric in first-year composition, as Robert Connors does (55), how, in the course of 100 years, the teacher of rhetoric went from a position of respect to one of exploitation?

Of course, we can't ask what happened to rhetoric in first-year composition without asking about the material conditions under which it has been taught. Connors, like other rhetoric and composition historians, locates this status change in the shift from old-school, male-dominated undergraduate colleges operating in the classical tradition with only limited goals for professional training to the large research university adapted from the German model emphasizing disciplinary specialization and the advancement of knowledge through graduate study, research, and publication (60).

The accompanying shift of emphasis from oral to written discourse and the resulting increase in work for the teacher of rhetoric helped create this permanent underclass in the hierarchy of institutions now driven by scholarship and research. The rhetoric remaining in nineteenth-century courses combined eighteenth-century approaches to elocution with *belles-lettres*, and used literary examples to model rhetorical moves, critical ideas, and "psychological" appeals to mental faculties such as reason and imagination—all of which gave rise to the modes of discourse we have subsequently demonized. As speech moved to separate departments, emphasis on persuasion gave way to concern with correction and organization. What we call the current-traditional model came to the fore as the teacher-proof method, which can conveniently be taught by contingent, if not untrained, instructors, whose labor becomes increasingly separated from respected scholarship in philology and literary history.

More important than the turn toward skills development in the gradual demise of rhetoric within composition is the rise of English Studies, concerned—as Sharon Crowley, Bill Readings, and others remind us—with the preservation of culture, the development of taste, and of the individual mind. Literature as the preferred vehicle for preserving culture (as opposed to rhetoric), and composition's spin-off concern with [personal expression] and self-discovery are what really did rhetoric in—and what still compete with rhetoric every time. When nineteenth-century rhetoric becomes a pedagogy of taste, according to Crowley, with an expectation that the rules maintaining class distinctions will be internalized (42), first-year courses become as much about "surveillance" and evaluating students' character as about formal fluency or the quality of arguments. Like literature, first-year rhet/comp "reinforces the exclusivity of academic discourse" and thus is reserved for the few (253).

Along with rhetoric's complicity in the maintenance of class boundaries in the American university, it is impossible to consider what it has become in the last 100 years without considering the extent to which the teaching of rhetoric is in the hands of those whose scholarly expertise is not in rhetoric—young academics for whom this work is either a dead-end or something to be gotten up and out of as soon as possible. Krista Ratcliffe's email from Sharon Crowley says—and we knew this—that Sharon wishes rhetoric didn't have to "attach its flag to composition" (Crowley qtd. in Ratcliffe). True, rhetoric's alignment with composition courses means that rhetoric gets no disciplinary respect. As long as rhet/comp is not on equal footing

with the rest of the work that the English department does, it's not going to happen. But we don't want to blame the victim composition here. The culprit—even as I teach it and try to build alliances with it—is still literature, and the legacy of the relationship of poetics to rhetoric. As long as composition and rhetoric studies participates in certifying the "nonliterary writing by the unentitled" (Miller, *Textual* 54), its capital will never be that of the "entitled" textual work performed by the rest of the English department. Obviously, Crowley's suggestion that we abolish the universal writing requirement, while enabling a more rigorous elective rhetoric curriculum, would affect composition's capital considerably (and that of all of English) in the institutional marketplace.

While it doesn't really matter, finally, in what department or seminar the doctoral student I mentioned earlier reads Plato or Habermas as s/he branches out as a scholar and a teacher, the attachment of rhetoric's flag to composition is what keeps rhetoric alive in English departments, and English departments from shrinking to the size of classics and speech departments. At many schools, classics and speech departments would love to take over the teaching of composition if it would save them from institutional extinction. Crowley points out that our stubborn hold on the universal writing requirement has less to do with our fear of job loss than with our "service ethic"—the belief that "our students need what we teach" (256). Abolition of the requirement at many schools would result in the reallocation of literacy accreditation to other departments. If composition is no longer the primary mechanism by which incoming students are scrutinized, other programs, departments, and administrators looking to amass territory and revenue will happily take over the job of "initiat[ing] judging, and categorizing" (Miller, "Composition" 27). All that said, permit me to wax a bit more optimistic. If we do finally own up to the composition/rhetoric relationship as "cultural practice rather than an intellectual development" (Miller, "Composition" 21) serving various agendas, what new purposes can we imagine for that relationship? There's no question that rhetoric figures into the social and political dimensions of contemporary pedagogy—in ways that level the high and low culture playing field in reading and writing courses. Analyzing with students how language constructs rather than mirrors experience makes possible something other than the policing of error and the cultivation of taste. In our cultural studies-based composition course at Indiana, for instance, we are concerned that ideological critique not become the "content" that must be delivered back undamaged. When it works, our teachers (who do manage to merge work on thesis and paragraphing with critique) and students rhetorically negotiate their analyses of cultural texts (including ads, videos and films), resisting and reshaping critical positions to meet their own ends. So as not to merely replace one "banking model" with another, as a program, we examine the rhetorical practices in our classrooms and continue to explore our motives for encouraging critique and why our students often resist it. An emphasis on "pop cultural studies" (Ratcliffe) these days need not leave rhetoric or writing behind.

The idea that everything is rhetorical, constructed by language, affected by how it is described and whose interests are being served, is, of course, a tall order. "Who you gonna call" to teach all this? If we reconfigure required first-year composition as cultural studies or rhetorical studies, we may find ourselves handing that "underclass" of sometimes brand new teachers sophisticated, postmodern tools to do what, Crowley and other contemporary rhetoricians remind us, is still institutionally configured as a straightforward modern job. I am grateful that the historical and philosophical interdisciplinary inquiry of the people and the field that brings us together here—

call it composition studies or rhetoric and composition—continues to make interesting connections to critical theory and to cultural studies—as long as these connections do not blind us to the inequities in the empire of English as a whole. Clearly, the teaching of rhetoric courses that will be taken seriously calls for more than the traditional teaching "underclass" arrangement—for serious professional preparation and economic compensation.

Hope for rhetoric can lie beyond the first-year English composition course; concepts like rhetorical situation and genre start to make sense when students in writing-intensive courses examine how other disciplines and professions engage in specialized practices. Charles Bazerman points to how recent "research in disciplinary, professional, and nonacademic settings" and "related theorizing have revived and reinterpreted classical rhetorical concepts" as well as "reached toward new ideas from sociology, cognitive psychology, science studies, linguistics, organization theory, and other disciplines that map the complexity of people's actions in the world" (250). Courses that reconfigure rhetoric and composition don't have to come from outside of English, however, if we take suggestions like Debra Dew's that first-year composition be retooled as "rhetoric and writing studies," a "disciplinary content" course (89), or David Russell's that writing courses take as their subject "the role of writing in human activities" rather than mere improvement (73). In the special issue I am currently editing for the journal *WPA* on changing the first-year writing curriculum, WPAs at a number of schools describe course and program revisions that reconfigure first-year writing as part of freshman seminars, distance-education for older students, technical and multimedia communication, and civic action. For some time now, in John Trimbur's courses, students both analyze and produce public discourse like AIDS awareness materials for different audiences and purposes. Composition probably least involves rhetoric when we have students only practicing discourse that we tell them is coming some time in their academic and professional futures, rather than engaging them in language use as part of meaningful action in the present. With or without a requirement, if we want to, we can maintain control of composition's exchange value in the university, but only if we continue to redefine its use value (see Bruce Horner). Cross-curricular and extracurricular sites for the production of discourse, including community literacy work, electronic/virtual websites and courses, service-learning venues, all of which are changing our assumptions about what students need now to analyze and produce discourse, are also expanding our rhetorical expertise.

I am a firm believer in the power of both composition programs and individual teachers to make more of the institutional position in which they find themselves and their work. To quote Charles Bazerman: "just because we have been funded with a reductionist notion of our task has not meant that we have been bound to follow through in a reductionist way" (252). While I understand the historically vexed position of composition in the university, it has been my experience that there is not one universally a-rhetorical, "bad" composition out there in need of rehabilitation or abolition any more than all teachers of composition are Cary Nelson's comp-droids hired "if they can walk a straight line at 10 o'clock in the morning" (Wilson A12). Instead, there are programs like Texas Christian's, still infused with Gary Tate's and Win Horner's devotion to rhetoric and Marquette's Krista Ratcliffe, preparing TAs in a pedagogy that reflects her own Ohio State training and willingness to examine race and gender representations with students in ways influenced by Kenneth Burke and bell hooks. In all these situations, I find colleagues reshaping the curricular space that composition has occupied and putting into practice what rhetoric has always addressed: not the mastery and regulation of language so much as the

ways in which language shapes, reflects, and changes practices among members of particular communities. I like to think that if there is a rhetoric/comp flag to be flown, it does not stand for one unified nation or tradition but for a working coalition.

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