

The Current State of Composition Scholar/Teachers: Is Rhetoric Gone or Just Hiding Out?

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In 1999 Joe Harris sent me page proofs for my *CCC*'s article on rhetorical listening, and I noticed that all my uses of the phrase "rhetoric and composition studies" had been changed to "composition studies." That was the first time I seriously wondered about the absence of rhetoric in the term composition studies; I chalked the absence up to the editor's wanting to save space or perhaps to achieve a more elegant styling, but afterwards, I kept noticing this absence in other journals and books.

In 2000 Nan Johnson stood up at the 4C's meeting of the coalition of women scholars in the history of rhetoric and composition, raised her arms in Jeremiad fashion, and asked, "WHERE are the panels on the history of rhetoric?" I, too, had noticed the absence, but had chalked it up to different presidents having different visions for the conference.

In 2001 Win Horner met Chris Farris and me for lunch at the Cs and lamented the absence of rhetoric panels. Again, I had noticed the absence but, after talking to Win, I became seriously annoyed at the pattern so much so that later in the year I submitted an article, which included the following aside: "I know it's more accepted these days to say 'composition studies,' but I recently realized that on this matter, I am a 'conservative' in that I refuse to relinquish either the founding role of rhetoric in our field or the rhetorical dimension of all the work we do, both scholarly and pedagogically."

As I write this piece, I am once again wondering about the absence of rhetoric in composition studies but feeling, perhaps, a little more uncertain about the issue.

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Here's the potential problem as Win expressed it at our luncheon: she fears that rhetoric may go the way of linguistics—that is, she fears rhetoric may become marginalized within "composition studies," just as linguistics was marginalized within "rhetoric and composition studies." To interrupt this possibility, Win organized a 2002 4C's panel. At our lunch, she recruited Chris and me and promised to recruit Kathleen. And because none of us can say "NO" to Win, we submitted a panel proposal in which my particular charge was twofold: (1) to explore the question: "Is rhetoric becoming marginalized within composition studies?" and (2) to ask: "If so, why?" "If not, why not?"

When Win gave this homework assignment, I promised to respond to these questions via three kinds of research: (1) studying noted doctoral programs' curricula for their requirements in rhetorical history and theory, (2) perusing scholarly journals and presses for their promotion of knowledge about rhetorical history and theory, and (3) interviewing prominent scholars in the history and theory of rhetoric. Where this sudden empirical impulse came from, I'm not certain, but the idea was that I would investigate this information to test two competing hunches. One,

that rhetoric has indeed lost some of its disciplinary prominence as composition studies embraces other theoretical groundings for its scholarly and pedagogical work; and two, that rhetoric is alive and well, just sometimes hiding out in terms like cultural studies and literacy. In my research for this paper, both my hunches proved correct . . . but in ways different from what I had expected. Let me explain.

First, as promised, I examined Ph.D. programs in rhetoric and composition, and found a continued commitment to rhetorical history and theory. Not surprisingly, programs at different places took different names. For example, Oklahoma has a Ph.D. in composition, rhetoric, and literacy; Kent State has one in literacy, rhetoric, and social practice; Purdue has one in rhetoric and composition; Miami University has one in composition and rhetoric; Arizona State University has one in rhetoric, composition, and linguistics. Several Ph.D. programs (such as the ones at the University of Arizona and Ohio State) still offer courses in rhetorical history and theory—some of them required, some not. Now, granted, examining program descriptions to determine course content or student learning is a less-than-perfect methodology; we all know that huge gaps may exist between institutional descriptions and actual classroom practices. Still, program descriptions offer definitions of how faculty and administrators imagine their programs. These descriptions reinforce disciplinary categories within which faculty and administrators define the field, their work, their students' education and, to some degree, the scholarly future of our field. Even if the faculty and administrators at a particular institution find themselves teaching against their established program categories, the categories are still exerting power via the negative. Of course, if I were to develop this argument further I'd need to chat with folks and find out the frequency the courses are offered and exact content of the syllabi.

Second, I examined the recent scholarly journals and found a continued commitment to the development of rhetorical knowledge. For example, the Sept. 2001 *CCC* includes what we might see as traditional scholarly terrain within rhetorical history and theory. Larry Beason's "Ethos and Error: How Business People React to Errors" continues the art of letterwriting, and Vicki Tolar Burton's "John Wesley and the Liberty to Speak: The Rhetorical and Literacy Practices of Early Methodism" continues the art of preaching. A recent *CCC* includes what we might see not as new cultural terrain but as scholarly terrain new to our discipline—i.e., Malea Powell's "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing" (2002) and Gwendolyn D. Pough's "Empowering Rhetoric: Black Students Writing Black Panthers" (2002). *JAC* has also promoted the development of rhetorical knowledge as in Anthony Petruzzi's "Kairotic Rhetoric in Freire's Liberatory Pedagogy" (2001) and Marguerite Helmers' "Painting as Rhetorical Performance" (2001). And a recent issue of *Rhetoric Review* offers Jane Donawerth's "Nineteenth-Century United States Conduct Book Rhetoric by Women" (2002) and G. Mitchell Reyes' "Sources of Persuasion in the Iliad" (2002). I could make a similar list for scholarly presses, but given the length constraints, I'll ask you to enthymemically supply that evidence.

Third, I emailed prominent historians in the history of rhetoric to ask their opinions on the following prompt: "Is rhetoric losing some of its prominence as our field becomes 'composition studies'?" To my delight, everyone I emailed was kind enough to email back with a variety of perspectives (all subsequent quotations are taken from these emails). A few scholars thought rhetoric was doing fine. In her email reply, Susan Jarratt said her "sense is that rhetoric is alive and well, although maybe not as prominent as a rhetorician would wish, or as thoroughly

incorporated in the discourses of composition studies as it could be.” Shirley Logan and Jackie Royster both replied that rhetoric is not in danger of going the way of linguistics. Other scholars, however, balanced their optimism with caveats. Rich Enos replied that he’s “very impressed with the way that researchers in composition have developed new research methods to answer important questions,” but he also worries “that there is a tendency by some to still limit composition studies to first-year college writing. We need to look at the history of composing processes as well as current practices.” Cheryl Glenn said in her reply, “Win may well be right” but “rhetoric is a plastic art, and if we practitioners stay plastic ourselves, we can hold on to a field and keep it alive.” Andrea Lunsford replied that she “share[s] Win’s concerns as well as Susan Miller’s sense that our field is . . . moving away from real, close attention to writing as our subject (drifting to a kind of pop cultural studies, etc.). The 4C’s programs for the last few years have provided evidence for these concerns. . . .” These concerns are important to Andrea because she believes that “rhetoric provides the intellectual and theoretical grounding for our subject.” And last but certainly not least, Sharon Crowley replied that she also shares Win’s concerns: “[a]t the last meeting of RSA, I was discomfited by the concern shown by Big Dogs in speech departments . . . about the demise of rhetoric in their discipline. If these guys are worried, then we should all be worried.” But she offers some hope: “rhetoric is a very flexible discipline. When its institutional trappings diminish or disappear, it always returns in some other guise—the current guise is some versions of cultural studies.” She ended her email with a rousing peroration that I can’t resist including: “[A]s you know, I am not particularly happy that in [E]nglish departments rhetoric has had to attach its flag to composition, which in most of its institutional manifestations is one of the most non-rhetorical activities in the university. Better dead than that!”

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So, given this research, what have I deduced about the state of rhetoric within composition studies?

Deduction #1: My question about rhetoric’s losing its prominence begs another question of conjecture: “Exactly how prominent was rhetoric in our field’s origin?” Having had the good fortune to train with Ed Corbett and Andrea Lunsford and to be mentored by Win, this question feels like blasphemy on my tongue. For when I think “inside the box” of my training, my narrative of our field’s origins goes something like this:

In the beginning was the word and the word was rhetoric. Corbett, Kinneavy, Horner and Lauer said, ‘Let rhetoric spread within English departments throughout the land . . . as a productive theoretical foundation for teaching first-year composition.’ They separated process from product. And, they said, rhetoric was good. Thus began the field of rhetoric and composition studies.

That’s my narrative, and I hold it dear. When Chris Farris dared to suggest to me over the phone that perhaps my narrative didn’t really exist for everyone—that is, that rhetoric didn’t drive all first-year writing programs (then or now), I replied rather defensively, “Well it exists for me.” But, as always, she made me think. This time, though, she made me think “outside the box” of my Ohio State training.

Our field boasts various narratives of origin, not all of which are necessarily tied into classical rhetorical history and theory. I'm thinking here, for example, of the early cognitivists and expressivists. Thanks to James Berlin, we all know that these narratives exist alongside one another. But the problem I've had, which explains my defensive response to Chris and which, I think, also explains Win's concern, is that I've unconsciously turned my narrative of our field's rhetorical origins into a grand narrative that attempts to explain our discipline and all first-year writing programs. When I step back and acknowledge that my narrative, though a very important narrative, is one of several, then my defensiveness falls away—and so too, to some degree, does my concern about the future of rhetoric in composition studies. Susan Jarratt's point is well taken: currently there may not be as much rhetoric in composition studies as a rhetorician would wish. That said, let's circle back to my original question. Maybe rhetoric is not losing its prominence so much as we rhetoricians are being reminded that our narrative is not a grand narrative of our field or of all first-year writing programs. If that's true, then Cheryl Glenn's point is well taken: it is incumbent upon us rhetoricians to keep rehearsing and enhancing our narrative(s).

Deduction #2: At the risk of sounding as if I'm contradicting myself, even though rhetorical history and theory may not explain our entire discipline, traces of rhetoric nevertheless permeate every facet of composition studies, just as traces of rhetoric permeate every facet of life. Granted, composition scholars today may just as readily cite Chantal Mouffe or Michael Eric Dyson as Aristotle. But as Kenneth Burke has taught us, rhetoric may be defined very broadly (e.g., I tell the students in my undergraduate rhetorical theory class that the study of rhetoric is the study of how we use language and how language uses us); consequently, Mouffe and Dyson may be read, within composition studies, as rhetorical theorists. And that's a good thing. For as Andrea Lunsford noted in her return email, "rhetoric as a discipline has been completely male dominated and masculinized, and the discipline must be reshaped in order for many of us to do the kind of rhetorical work we want to do." So opening ourselves to other theories (feminist theories, critical race theories, cultural studies theories, economic theories, etc.) engenders productive enterprises.

Deduction #3: One productive enterprise is the linkage of rhetoric with cultural studies. But such a linkage comes with risks. One risk concerns scholarship (i.e., cultural studies may elide rhetoric). As Cheryl Glenn noted in her return email, ". . . Cultural Studies has become sexier for a good many young scholars and that . . . , along with . . . [our field's naming itself] 'composition studies' might squeeze out rhetoric. UNLESS, of course, we rhetoric folks once again stretch ourselves knowledgeably into cultural studies as well as [into] comp studies." Another risk concerns writing pedagogy (i.e., without a presence of rhetorical theory, a cultural studies writing pedagogy can too easily devolve into a content-only course). For a very sensible take on how to avoid this devolution and, instead, productively link rhetoric with cultural studies, Cheryl pointed me to the WPA listserv, where Bruce McComiskey says:

. . . [C]ultural studies gives us . . . a set of heuristics that can help guide students' composing processes. . . . These heuristics ask students to examine in new ways their assumptions about how communication functions in certain social situations and institutions. What cultural studies does not (or at least should not) give us is a set of pre-fab political stances from which to criticize dominant culture. While it is true that in cultural studies scholarship, these heuristics most often generate Left-leaning discourse,

that does not have to be (and, indeed, most often isn't) the case when we use these heuristics to teach writing that is aware of its own . . . situatedness. Just as freewriting itself does not serve capitalism and is not the sole province of expressivist pedagogies, so the heuristics derived from cultural studies do not inherently serve Leftist political ends. Students provide their own political leanings—the heuristics simply direct students' attention toward aspects of language and culture that may . . . be as yet unexamined.

Note that McComiskey (by discussing rhetorical situatedness and invention strategies) demonstrates not only the presence of rhetorical theory along with cultural studies scholarship but also an awareness of rhetorical theory along with cultural studies pedagogy. This scholarly presence and pedagogical awareness of rhetorical theory, along with cultural studies, must be made overt in graduate classes, TA training and in the undergraduate classroom if students are to see the rhetorical dimensions of their cultural studies critiques; otherwise, students may leave graduate seminars or writing classrooms thinking that they've learned to write specific kinds of papers rather than understanding that they've learned rhetorical conventions that they may adapt in other university courses and beyond.

Deduction #4: As Andrea Lunsford, Sharon Crowley and Cheryl Glenn have all pointed out, rhetoric sometimes hides out in the term cultural studies; relatedly, I think, it also hides out in the term literacy. When I did a Google search for literacy and composition, I came up with more than 215,000 webpage matches; when I did a search for rhetoric and composition, I came up with 135,000. And although I didn't do an exhaustive comparison, a brief skim confirmed overlap. Thus, the same caveats I offered about cultural studies scholarship and pedagogy hold true here, too. Literacy scholarship and pedagogy are not always informed by rhetorical history and theory. Nor need they be. But, within composition studies, literacy scholarship and pedagogy can be enriched by the presence of rhetorical history and theory.

And finally, Deduction #5: At first glance, arguing about the absence of rhetoric in the phrase composition studies may seem like an exercise in nominalism. But it is not. For as Plato has taught us, how we define our terms matters. Cornel West reminds us of this fact in his book *Race Matters* as does Ruth Frankenberg in her book *White Women/Race Matters*. So I think that Win was right to organize that 4C's panel to consider the presence, the absence, and the definitions of the terms rhetoric and composition. For how we define ourselves as a field matters not simply to ourselves but to our departments, to our universities, and (whether they know it or not) to our students.

From my particular disciplinary standpoint (which is probably most informed by Aristotle, Kenneth Burke, and Adrienne Rich), I find it odd that, if one term had to drop out of the phrase rhetoric and composition studies, that the term was rhetoric and not composition. After all, our field's current scholarship is certainly not limited to composition in first-year writing classes nor even to composition in other cultural sites. Moreover, thanks to Ed Corbett, I've always seen rhetoric as the larger category of the two. Within rhetoric and composition studies, a scholar might pursue first-year English concerns, writing center concerns, WAC concerns, composition at various cultural sites, historical traditions of rhetoric, cultural discourses of gender, ethnicity, age, nationality. . . . But wait. My desire for a grand narrative is kicking in again. But you know what, that's OK. I'm aware of it. And with that awareness, I'm choosing to exercise my ethical

responsibility to argue for what is good . . . , what is true . . . , and what is possible . . . in the presence of rhetoric.

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