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A Practical Approach to Teaching Rhetorical Theory

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Although much has been written in our journals concerning the teaching of rhetorical criticism, less attention has been given to the teaching of rhetorical theory. This essay provides a practical approach to teaching a course in rhetorical theory and suggests assessment strategies that encourage students to find the relevance of rhetorical theory in their own lives. Student responses to these strategies as implemented in the author's rhetorical theory class are also included.

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Assessment can seem the bane of any educator—we recognize its usefulness while dreading the performance. As a new assistant professor teaching rhetorical theory for the first time, I was confronted by the question of how to assess my students' understanding. This was partially driven by practical concerns; I needed to grade *something*, yet I would much prefer the Aristotelian method of lecturing in the courtyard. My students had enrolled in the only rhetorical theory class they would have in their entire undergraduate career. Because my department is heavily weighted toward public relations and journalism, my students had little introduction to rhetoric other than the standard overviews that come in courses such as argumentation, public speaking, and introduction to communication. Yet I was expected to teach a survey course that covered the Western rhetorical tradition from the Ancients to contemporary rhetorical theory. In this light, to drag them through such essays as McKerrow's (1989) "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis" and then test them on it seemed unreasonable.

Despite a considerable amount of articles concerning the teaching of rhetorical criticism (e.g., Bineham, 1990; Chesebro & Hamsher, 1973; Foss, 1989; Griffin, 1995; Gronbeck, 1989; Henry & Sharp, 1989; Medhurst, 1989a; Medhurst, 1989b), much less has been written concerning the teaching of rhetorical theory. This essay is an attempt to help remedy this situation by providing insights that I would have found useful when teaching my first course in rhetorical theory. I provide strategies for helping students find the relevance of rhetorical theory in their own lives. If, as Brummett (1984) notes, the goal of rhetorical theory is "to teach people how to experience their rhetorical environments more richly" (p. 103), application and relevance are essential. Because students are more likely to retain information that they find useful and relevant, it seems logical to assess them in ways that reinforce this goal. Moreover, assessment is connected to the kind of teaching environment one creates. Thus, I discuss the kind of learning community that my students and I worked to create. What follows is a model of my assessment strategies and students' reactions to them.

Reinforcing Relevance

Rhetorical theory is essential instruction for civic life, so the ability to recognize or recall theory is not a sufficient goal for the course. Students must be able to retain and apply theory to their own experience. With this goal, I developed my course in rhetorical theory around this guiding principle: *Regularly applying rhetorical theory to one's own experience will enhance knowledge retention and allow for a deeper understanding of rhetorical theory.*

The students in my class had varied life goals, including: manager of a country musician; events planner; broadcast journalist; communication professors; writer; stay at home mother; marketing professional; and human resources specialist. As I constructed the course, the question that immediately arose was how to make ancient rhetorical theory relevant to my students. Despite our insistence that rhetoric can apply to just about anything, it is sometimes difficult for students to recognize this. Rather than simply telling students that rhetoric is relevant to them, I asked them to find the applications in their lives. After all, we learn from Aristotle's (trans. 1991) discussion of the enthymeme that asking the audience to fill in the missing elements in an argument can be a powerful means of persuasion (1395b20; see also Bitzer, 1959, p. 408). To help students understand and apply rhetorical theory I created a four-pronged approach:

1. Students will read original rhetorical theory;
2. Students will have frequent opportunities to apply theory through reflection papers;
3. Learning will take place in an environment where error is tolerated;
4. Students will synthesize their understanding of rhetorical theory through a final exam that is relevant to their individual professional goals.

Assessment Strategies

I chose to employ two major assessment strategies. First, I would have students write regular response papers, which would allow me to provide immediate feedback while the material was still fresh in their minds. This allowed me to assess the lower levels of knowledge, comprehension, and application (Bloom, 1956; for a brief overview of Bloom's taxonomy, see Murphy, 2007). Second, students would write a final paper that would provide an opportunity to synthesize the material. This provides an opportunity to assess the higher levels of knowledge, specifically the ability to synthesize the material and evaluate its usefulness for their chosen career (Bloom, 1956; Murphy, 2007). I will discuss each of these components in greater detail.

Although the readings and the community building aspects of the course may not seem directly related to assessment, they provide a context in which to understand the course. For example, the choice of readings dictates the level of understanding I can expect. If the readings come from a textbook, I can expect the student to learn a summary of the theory; I can expect a deeper level of understanding if they have read the original works. Moreover, the atmosphere of the course is an integral part of the learning process (Mawhinney & Sagan, 2007; Meyer & Turner, 2006; Robinson & Kakela, 2006), thus the learning environment and strategies of assessment are tied together.

Readings

The only required textbook in my course was Bizzell and Herzberg's (2001) *The Rhetorical Tradition*. I chose this text because it provides primary texts rather than interpretations of the texts. All other readings were stored in the university library's online course reserves and taken directly from journals in the discipline. The digitization of communication journals has allowed me to spare students the expense of buying an anthology while stressing to them that they were reading primary research. Although there are introductory textbooks on rhetorical theory (e.g., Borchers, 2006; Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985; Gill, 1994; Poulakos & Poulakos, 1999), I prefer to have students read the actual theory rather than other authors' interpretations of those theories because it gives them an opportunity to form their own interpretations of the theory. When reading primary works, students also gain a greater understanding of the nuances of the theories under consideration.

Although my students struggled with the readings, they could often distill the general ideas from the essays. They suggested that I provide some indication concerning what they should look for in the next day's readings. In future courses I will provide a brief overview of the articles that we will discuss during the next class period. I also found that students appreciated my explanations of why I chose particular essays for us to read.

Building Community

Rhetorical theory can be a daunting course even for advanced students. As students work to understand the concepts, they often make mistakes. I needed to provide a space in which students were not afraid to take risks in testing the theories. Kaufman (2008) writes,

> When learners and teachers feel inhibited to give voice to their experiences, when they feel uncomfortable naming their world to others, when they worry about the interpersonal repercussions of contributing to the discourse, the possibility of the classroom as a site of personal and social transformation suffers. (p. 169)

As students became more comfortable with each other, they began to share more about themselves and these stories formed a shared canon from which to draw. Rather than discouraging students from telling stories about their lives, I encouraged this behavior and explained how these stories demonstrated elements of rhetorical theory. These stories about food, shoes, religion, and their jobs also allowed me to assess the understanding of the students. When the class was particularly reticent, I encouraged discussion by reminding them that 30 percent of their grade was participation and asking one of the students a question specific to their experience or goals. Attendance was also included as a component of the final grade.

Rather than simply discussing *doxa*, we created it in the context of our classroom. Over time, we developed a series of inside jokes that kept the atmosphere light. One student stated, "I enjoyed the way we joked around in the beginning of class and kept running jokes that we could relate to particular works" (Clarissa). Another student summed it up this way:

> In this class, you gave us serious, funny, hard, easy, hilarious, boring, feminist, chauvinistic, shocking, important, and every other adjective that would describe a professor that wears shorts so that I can feel more like an equal, talks about shoes and Victoria's Secret so that he can relate to his students, and somehow became "one of the girls." So here's to you Mr. short-wearing professor of Rhetoric, we salute you. And always remember, "You've come a long way, baby!!!" (Ashley)

In this short excerpt, she summarized many of the running themes in the class. For example, several class discussions began with a story from a student who worked at Victoria's Secret concerning some odd occurrence that had happened to her that week. The challenge for me was to not see these stories as extraneous and to somehow relate them to the rhetorical theory at hand. For example, during our discussion on Augustine, a student related that she had gone to see her cousin give her first sermon that weekend and her cousin called her out of the audience unexpectedly. Rather than move on in the direction that I had intended, I asked her what Augustine would have to say about this experience. Students were able to draw connections between the essays under consideration and relevant events in their lives: "I appreciate that you were able to connect nearly every topic of conversation and off-the-wall story to something that pertained to an educational class discussion" (Katherine).

In some ways, the strategy of attempting to find individual relevance in rhetorical theory answers some of the concerns leveled against McKerrow's (1989) call for a "critical rhetoric" (see Charland, 1991; Hariman, 1991). If professors of rhetoric are to bring rhetoric to the general population, we must be able to speak the language of those we instruct. When discussing McKerrow's essay, I asked the class to describe how they would rewrite that essay for

Cosmopolitan magazine. Students considered the ideal reader of the magazine (Black, 1970) and then described different ways to explain structures of power, such as the glass ceiling or gender stereotypes—elements that would be relevant to *Cosmo*'s sexually active career woman. Such a strategy would help not only in the classroom, but in the dissemination of rhetorical scholarship in general.

The architecture of the classroom facilitated the community-building process. The class took place in a conference room around a large table and had only nine students. We all faced each other; I sat at the table with them rather than lecturing at the head of the class. The more intimate setting, in contrast to the traditional lecture hall or classroom, encouraged discussion and downplayed the overt display of hierarchy. When I asked my students to evaluate the class and tell me what worked and how it could be improved, they noted that what made the course enjoyable was the sense of community and atmosphere of the class. One student noted, "The number of students worked well. We were able to build interpersonal relationships to the point where we were comfortable enough to discuss the theory at hand without worry of whether we were 'right' or 'wrong'" (Christine). Another student stated that she was "thankful for the size and atmosphere of our class," adding, "I don't think I would have gained nearly as much in a larger classroom setting" (Clarissa).

Reflection Papers

Brewer and Jozefowicz (2006) found that "integrating open-ended journal assignments and reflection papers . . . was an effective tool to breathe life into our class dynamics and to foster the development of higher-level thinking and analytical skills" (p. 203). I structured the course such that throughout the semester, every two weeks, students wrote a one to two page paper describing how the essays we read during the previous two weeks could help them in their chosen profession. This strategy provides students enough time to mentally process the material but not enough time to allow it to fade away. Grading was done with a check system. If the student turned in the paper on time and made an attempt to apply the theories under consideration to their profession, they received the full points. I took this approach in order to provide an environment in which students could experiment with the theories without concern over grades. In these papers, I was able to provide feedback that corrected misconceptions concerning the theories and other suggestions for how the theories could be further applied in their profession. These papers allowed me to see how the students understood the theories and, at times, revealed areas in which I needed to provide further explanation. The reflection papers were worth 40 percent of the final grade.

As students encountered such writers as Gorgias, Aristotle, Christine de Pizan, Peter Ramus, and Madeleine de Scudéry, they recognized the relevance of writers centuries removed from them. They recognized the importance of Mary Astell's (1697/2001) insistence that women become educated. They reveled in Gorgias's (2001) seemingly amoral assertions that speech is a powerful lord, yet began to see the logic in his approach as we read works by Segal (1962) and Poulakos (1983). Students gained a greater understanding of the role of the human voice in persuasion. They also recognized the role of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in their own arguments.

In their response papers, students began to recognize how rhetorical theory applied to their chosen careers. A woman who worked at Victoria's Secret applied DeLuca's (1999)

conception of body rhetoric to her job of selling undergarments. A woman who plans to work as an event planner saw the importance of Burke's (1952) notion that the words that we choose may have significant rhetorical consequences because of the ideological weight in particular terms and the presence of different terministic screens (Burke, 1969). A budding human resources professional found parallels between Simons's (1970) theory of building support for social movements and running an effective business. The aspiring country musician manager found wisdom in de Scudéry's (1683/2001) prescription for the art of conversation. Each recognized the importance of understanding the rhetorical situation in which rhetors may find themselves (Bitzer, 1968) and continually returned to Plato's (trans. 1961) assertion that the orator must know the souls of the audience (271d).

My students found the system of response papers useful as a way to work through the material. One student noted:

> It was very effective when we had to do the readings then relate them to our personal and professional lives. This reinforced a lot of ideas and will be a constant reminder of how rhetoric can be found anywhere. I have caught myself at work saying, "Madame de Scudéry would be proud of me." (Jennifer)

Another student also recognized the utility of regular response papers: "You've assigned response papers, not as busy work, but as a way for us to view and apply rhetoric" (Christine). The student's comments and their response papers suggest that regular response papers helped students retain and apply rhetorical theory. These papers also provided me with a way to assess whether students actually understood and could apply the material.

Final Exam

About halfway through the course I explained to the students that the final exam would require them to each develop an essay that describes what their profession should know about rhetorical theory, drawing on the material that we discussed in class. I explained that the response papers that they had written throughout the course would help them write the final paper. I waited to explain the final exam until they had become used to understanding and applying each theory on its own. Although it is important to understand how these theories fit together, until one understands them on their own terms it is difficult to see all of the possible connections. Such an exam provides an opportunity for synthesis rather than mere repetition and reinforces the relevance of rhetoric in their own lives.

For grading criteria, I told the students that I was most concerned with application and synthesis. I did not have a specific rubric; I explained to them that they should seek to weave together the various threads of rhetorical theory that we had discussed in class. I expected them to draw from a variety of theories and to use them correctly. I stated that I expected a formal paper, complete with correctly cited sources (I had allowed them to write their response papers more informally because I was more interested in assessing whether they understood the theories). I explained that they should construct an argument through their paper, complete with evidence that supported their arguments. I advised them to not simply put all of their response papers together into one big final paper, but I expected them to use the examples that they

described in the response papers and to draw on those ideas. The final exam was worth 30 percent of the final grade.

Overall, the students performed well in the final exam. I was surprised to see how students tied rhetorical theory to their own lives. For example, the student who works for Victoria's Secret immediately recognized the applicability of DeLuca's (1999) notion of body rhetoric. She wrote that the Victoria's Secret "models uphold an image that entices men and persuades women. 'Their bodies, then, become not merely flags to attract attention for the argument but the site and substance of the argument itself' (DeLuca, 1999, p. 10)" (Samantha). All of the students used rhetorical theory in an appropriate way and none seemed to completely misunderstand the theories that they used. This underscores the usefulness of the continual feedback and reinforcement students received in the response papers.

Although I consider the final exam to be a success overall, especially as a first attempt, some changes are necessary. First, although I resist using rubrics, students would likely benefit from seeing some examples of what would constitute an A, B, C, D, or F paper, demonstrating the varying degrees of synthesis, understanding, complexity of the argument, and quality of writing. Students would also benefit from turning in a preliminary draft about a week before the final paper is due. Some of the students brought their papers to me before the deadline and I found that some of them recognized the applicability of particular theories but had difficulty weaving them together. At other times, they recognized the utility of the theory but had difficulty explaining why the work of a particular theorist was useful for them. After some discussion, they could see how the theorists fit together in their specific endeavors. For example, one student who plans to be a writer recognized the importance of understanding *doxa* but had not expressed why this was important. Drawing on previous conversations and classroom discussions, I noted that what she really seemed interested in was *changing doxa*, and we discussed how the essays we read by McKerrow (1989), Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994), and Black (1970) fit into that goal. Scheduling a meeting before the final exam to discuss how they plan to apply the theories to their profession would provide an opportunity to help facilitate their ability to synthesize the material.

Finally, in the future I will also be more explicit concerning the kind of writing I expect. McEntee and Harper (2007) explain that students are often unclear on what is required of them in scholarly writing, noting the "crevasse that lies between students' understandings of research-based writing and their markers' expectations" (p. 215). Several students did not correctly cite their sources, writing it as a narrative. They also engaged in what some call "drive-by citations" in which they simply drop the name of the author and move on without really explaining why they had cited that theorist. This kind of exam allows considerable latitude but I may have provided too little instruction on the mechanics of the paper. Perhaps I also demonstrated too much faith in the required composition courses that they had taken as a prerequisite to this class. Some seemed puzzled when I asked for their reference page. Despite these issues, the final served the desired purpose: to help students apply rhetorical theory to their lives.

Conclusion

Assessing the ability to apply material can seem a daunting task. In the current academic environment, students continually wonder at the practical utility of the material that we teach

them—in other words, they want to know how the material will help them get a job. Like many in higher education, I reject the notion that the university should serve only as job training but there is no reason to ignore this impulse in students. Rather, educators should invite opportunities to help students apply the material to their lives as a way to encourage knowledge retention. Students *want* to connect theory to practice; our assessment strategies should help them in this endeavor. Biggs (1999) writes, "Good teaching is getting most students to use the higher cognitive level processes that the more academic students use spontaneously" (p. 58). Strategies that help students understand, apply, and evaluate rhetorical theory can also help them find the relevance of these theories in their personal lives.

Professors of rhetorical theory must recognize that the very act of teaching rhetorical theory is itself a rhetorical act. Students continually bring together "fragments" of their own experience and the information we teach them to construct their own understanding of rhetorical theory (McGee, 1990). Benson (1989) writes,

> Speakers and writers, acting rhetorically, create not only themselves, but their audiences. That creation is an act of rhetorical being and an invitation to rhetorical being. Listeners and readers engage in rhetorical action of their own being, knowing, and doing with the speaker and other listeners, accepting or refusing to accept the images offered by the speaker, enacting or declining to enact the role of the public. (p. 320)

The question then becomes, "What are we inviting our students to become?" If, as McGee (1990) suggests, audience members are the true creators of the texts, professors must adequately equip students for this work, realizing that students will bring in unexpected threads and fibers as they weave their own tapestry of rhetorical theory. Giroux (1992) writes,

> This is what the pedagogical struggle is all about—opening up the material and discursive basis of particular ways of producing meaning and presenting ourselves, our relations with others, and our relation to our environment so as to consider the possibilities not yet realized. (p. 202)

Helping students to find the relevance of rhetorical theory by inviting them to create their own mosaic of texts by adding rhetorical theory to their already existing knowledge and experiences allows all of us to find these "possibilities not yet realized."

Spronken-Smith (2005) writes, "The constructivist theory of learning is based on the premise that meaning is not transmitted by direct instruction, but that meaning is created by the students' learning activities" (p. 205). But the construction of meaning may take place long after the conclusion of the class. The next semester, one of my former students sent me a link to a video describing Barack Obama's oratorical style, writing, "All I could think about was the rhetoric class I had with you last semester and Gorgias' 'Speech is a powerful lord!'" Teaching rhetorical theory is an exercise in looking to the past to see potential for the future. As one student remarked, "I have a feeling that what each of us has gained from this class will not be evident until we are placed in new situations and forced to analyze where we stand" (Katherine). Another student wrote, "When the class was over I realized that this class really forced me to

examine things. It forced me to think about the way life works and functions" (Kristin). I can think of no better outcome for any course.

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Appendix A

Course syllabus