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USING RHETORIC DIFFERENTLY: AN ADVANCED WRITING COURSE FROM HISTORICAL MATERIALS

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This paper is a practical account of a particular advanced writing course, but I'm presenting it because I think the particular course raises significant general questions.

One of the welcome turns, for me, in recent writing about composition has been a renewed dialogue between teachers and researchers, teachers and scholars, teachers and theorists—in summary, teachers and less-teachers. I could see why, ten or fifteen years ago, professional compositionists grew leery, even scornful, of oldfashioned practitioner accounts of “What I did one day in the freshman classroom,” but for myself I often found these practical accounts fascinating or at least provoking. Indeed, afterwards, I'd often realize I'd stolen from them, even when I'd thought they were weak theoretically. So I'm glad the suspicion of practitioner experience seems to be over, because that kind of thing is part of this paper.

But as well as rehabilitating such stories, the new turn towards practitioner-research has also taught us something--that, if we analyze what we and our students have done, how we did it, and what it led to, we will usefully expose the gaps, limitations, oclusions, in the theoretical models we privilege. Practice provides an intertext for rereading the hegemonic pieties of composition theory.

My account falls into three parts: first, the pedagogic problem I faced, distinct from ut analogous to that faced by many teachers of advanced composition; then, the course I settled on to meet that problem; and third, the theoretical conclusions to which the course has led me.

PART ONE: THE PROBLEM

About four years ago now, I took on a new course-assignment, an advanced writing course for a specialized clientele. It was a course, vaguely titled "Studies in Writing," for honors students from varied majors. It had to accommodate both students who had gone through freshman English or the honors equivalent and those who had exempted all freshman level writing requirements.

There are, of course, several established options for a course at this level. Neither of the two most popular advanced-writing course models seemed to fit; given the varied student population, I couldn't really plump for a creative writing course nor for a career-oriented course in technical, scientific or business writing. Nor would a generalized modern writing course have worked. Our honors students, like most advanced students, are hypersensitive about being offered something that even appears to be like lower-level work. Given the widespread influence in our state of Breadloaf and the National Writing Project, and the general process-orientation of our freshman program at that time, it would have been repetitious and counterproductive to plan a straightforward, generic process-oriented workshop. How many times can students undergo conversion from the sinful externalities of current-traditionalism to the new light of the process experience? In any case, ideologically, I don't believe the activity of writing is an end in itself, any more than I believe literature is an end in itself.

The obvious answer, a course in writing across the disciplines, was ruled out once I looked at the available casebooks, which didn't at that time provide an adequate range of real writing from different disciplines. If good writers in all disciplines were to approximate to the same, *New Yorkerish* general-audience model, if scientific discourse meant Stephen Jay Gould or Lewis

Thomas rather than the *Journal of Bacteriology* (as then seemed the case), we were back with just the kind of covert belles-lettristic prescriptivism I most suspected in the workshop movement.

Neither my students, nor the textbook-editors, knew enough about the disciplines for the course to tackle the kinds of serious research-based writing that pose the interesting, that is, the distinctive rhetorical problems.

And, of course, I had my own agenda. Given the special population for the course, I wanted to show the students, and prove to myself, that advanced writing courses, like advanced literature courses, were not just more of the same old thing under an elevated course number, but really did involve an intellectual advance, an increasingly sophisticated theoretical understanding of the subject being studied. I don't know about your institution, but at mine, though we have some famously effective teachers, advanced writing courses have not always been noted for their intellectual rigour, or even for their workload, and there's evidence that this problem been widespread (cf. "Guidelines;" Hogan, 28; Sturm, 39). My longstanding concern about this question has recently been voiced also, I'm glad to note, by Donald Stewart in the May issue of *College Composition and Communication*. Stewart argues that "the proliferation of practical writing courses" has created a perception among students that "work in composition is primarily a matter of skills, not intellectual substance" (194). Has this always been a misperception of the courses we offer, or is it only too accurate? Certainly, it was not a perception that I wanted to foster.

PART TWO: THE COURSE

So I come to part two, the course I taught in attempting to meet these problems. Stewart's solution is to subordinate practice to theory, and to require that all English majors take two full

upper-division courses in the history and theory of rhetoric, from, as he rather unwisely specifies, Plato to James Berlin. I didn't need a curriculum, just a single course, and I don't like Stewart's confident dichotomizing between practice and theory, but my solution was remarkably like his historical course, even down to the reading I chose. `

There is an unavoidable moral ambiguity in adopting historical rhetoric for modern writing courses. I teach on a campus physically divided between classical antebellum buildings and modern concrete blocks, both equally separated from the local community or economy by a cordon sanitaire of empty automobiles. The physical plant, as we say, inscribes architecturally the contradictions of a modern liberal education. Yet I am not above using the suspect antebellum Heritage-Inc. aspects of classical rhetoric to tap into my students' ambition, insecurities, maybe even snobbishness, as an initial motivation for study.

Unlike Stewart, however, I decided to teach historical rhetoric, not as a subject in itself, but in relation to rhetorical practice, as a way of defamiliarizing for my students their current writing practice and of sophisticating their awareness of how variously writing can be regarded. If you like, I saw historical rhetoric, not as a program of instruction, but as a way of deprogramming competent unsophisticated writers.

The modern precedent for linking historical rhetoric to student practice is, of course, Ed Corbett's well-known textbook, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, for many years the bestselling advanced writing text, and now happily into its long-needed third edition. I admired the way Corbett mixes theory and practice, and so far I've always used his text, with a xerox collection of supplementary readings. What I don't like about the text is its assumption that classical rhetoric is somehow natural and true, if you just build in a few suitable updates on minor points. Corbett believes, in the words of the preface, merely "that the elaborate system of

the ancients . . . is still useful and effective” (*Classical Rhetoric*, ix), and I wouldn't quarrel with that, but as his recent *Selected Essays* and the works of others influenced by him make clear, the classical revivalists make a much larger claim. Winifred Horner, for instance, in her text, asserts, in a sentence worth savouring, that classical rhetoric “continues to endure because it finds its source in the human spirit and its roots in the human mind” (ix; for a critique of Horner's conservatism, see Covino, “Review”). Corbett, and Horner after him, bring in ideas and illustrations from subsequent periods of rhetoric, but structure their texts around classical categories as a kind of basic truth, something like the laws of nature.

What I set out to do, though influenced by Corbett, was different. I wanted my students to confront, not the continuity, but the diversity, and disjunctions, of the rhetorical tradition, to see rhetorical theory itself as contingent, changing not just with philosophical developments, but with changed social exigencies. And the twist to the course would be that, after giving historicized readings to rhetorical approaches the students didn't previously know, we would move on to historicize the approaches they had previously been taught, and so denaturalize lazy or even earnest assumptions about how writing should best be done.

I structured the course as a chronological survey, divided into five units. The first four weeks were based on classical rhetoric, emphasizing invention and the topics, with readings from Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. After a brief satiric side trip to the medieval *artes* and their modern equivalents, the second unit focused on Renaissance and seventeenth-century rhetoric, looking first at the figures, schemes and tropes, with readings from the King James Bible and Lyly's *Euphues*, and then turning to Ramus and the rise of scientific prose, with passages from Bacon, Hobbes, Newton, and Bishop Sprat, in all of whom, providentially, the much-maligned figures refuse banishment. The third unit explores the political functions and social implications of

Enlightenment rhetoric, through Addison, the *Federalist*, and Burke, with theoretical discussion from Blair, Campbell and Whately. I allow myself another brief interval for comminations against the Romantic or anti-rhetorical, decontextualized ideas of composition that most of the students will have heard in their high-school literature classes. The fourth and shortest unit, the one that raised most eyebrows among my colleagues, is on nineteenth-century technical or positivist rhetoric, examining Herbert Spencer on syntax and readability, and Alexander Bain on paragraph structure (with cross-reference to analogous concepts in modern technical communication). The last unit is on twentieth-century political rhetoric, with readings from Kenneth Burke, Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. A final course review looks back at each of the periods in terms of the changing technologies of composition (from human memory to the networked computer) and changing technologies of communication (from the human voice through manuscript and the printing-press to mass media, business memos, and junk-mailing). The history is selective, with each period after the first standing for a single issue or topic, not for its actual historical complexity, but it makes a very enjoyable three-credit-hour scamper across the centuries, a kind of rhetorical equivalent of the survey courses in sophomore lit. or Western Civ.

But the history and the readings are only half the course. To each period-unit is linked a writing assignment, with class periods within each unit reserved for prewriting exercises, workshop discussions and peer-editing. The writing assignments, while on student-selected modern topics, involve historical role-playing—the application of the appropriate historical procedures or models. In the classical unit, I first assigned a Ciceronian defense speech, but more recently ask for a Platonic dialogue, debating a current issue through the systematic use of the topics (cf. Covino, “Defining,” 122). In the Renaissance, where my focus is on the rhetoric of display and the inescapably metaphoric nature of language, the assignment is to use the figures as inventional

tools, taking a character-description beyond the usual clichés. The Enlightenment unit asks for a formal political argument, manipulating the interplay of abstract principle and particular purpose, and twice so far this unit has conveniently coincided with a presidential election. The nineteenth-century unit involves the analysis and rewriting of a content-oriented paper or article against stated readability standards. Only the fifth paper is directly analytical, rather than imitative, inviting a broad choice of topics on media analysis or actual composing processes. As Corbett, and D'Angelo, would recognize, the imitative or ludic element in these assignments, the quasi-parodic playing with other people's ways of thinking and writing, seems to bring out student inventiveness of a kind that is often repressed when students are asked to be serious or write only in their own almost-inevitably-derivative voice.

I've taught this course now, with a bit of fine tuning, three times and it works. It improves writing. It provides students with a variety of strategies and techniques that they can, and do, use in other writing contexts after the course is over. It actually does, as I had hoped, historicize students' ideas about writing, and it sophisticates their understanding of the relation between ways of writing, ways of thinking, and modes of social interaction. It gives students new respect for, and new suspicion of, “good” writing, and it gives also new awareness of just how important the issues are with which rhetoric or writing theory has for so long been concerned. And the best responses I have had have been one or two or more years later, when a student is graduated and in law school or wherever, and sees full significance of it all.

PART THREE: THE IMPLICATIONS

And the fact that the course works brings me to the third and final part of the story, my thesis or argument, which I have reserved till the last. I think it works, not because the rhetoricians of the

past in their wisdom discovered truths about what Horner so transcendently invokes as the human spirit, but because they didn't. Past rhetorical theory, like present rhetorical theory, was a situationally-generated response; what we now politely or grandiosely denominate a theory was a set of operational procedures for writing under specific conditions, not a step in the gradual clarification of natural law.

It sounds obvious, but it isn't obvious to the classical revivalists. Corbett, and Horner, and D'Angelo, and sophisticated recuperators of the classical tradition as Lunsford and Ede, argue that there is something real and universal and transhistorical about, say, Aristotelean rhetoric, if only we interpret it rightly. It's perhaps a bit like oldfashioned literary critics going on about the universality of Homer or Shakespeare or Keats, and it's vulnerable to the same critical-theoretical moves. As Corbett himself ruefully acknowledges (in the concluding pages of his new *Selected Essays*), the classical revivalists really can offer no theoretical defense against even so broadly-stated a theoretical critique as that offered in Knoblauch and Brannon's *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing* (1984), with its covertly-romantic assumptions about the individual shaping of meaning. Modern philosophical compositionists, such as Berlin, or Berthoff, not just Knoblauch and Brannon, are surely correct in saying that traditionalism in itself is intellectually indefensible, that we and our students have to live in the late twentieth century, not in a kind of historical aristocratically-educated limbo, and that classical rhetoric, however modified or reinterpreted, represses or occludes much of our present experience with words.

On the other hand, neither romantics nor social epistemists can really explain the strange practical staying power of theoretically-outmoded rhetorical forms, techniques and strategies. In particular, most modern discussion is dishonest in its scorn for current-traditionalism, which, as virtually any freshman textbook shows, still provides most of our more practical advice about the

local structuring of informational material. Why do ideas that are at the theoretical level terribly simplistic, such as the overdetermined epistemology of classical invention, or the prescriptive editing patterns of current-traditionalism, still work for writers now?

The answer is that they work for writers now only under certain conditions, when the context or exigencies of our modern writing task replicate in some degree those to meet which the historical writing strategy was first generated. And if that is true of historical writing strategies, it is all too probably true also of the operational procedures we in our generation have devised and privileged as modern rhetorical theory.

What I learned from my course was that in some sense theory isn't theory, that rhetorical theory isn't only to be judged theoretically or philosophically. Each phase of rhetorical theory has structured or simplified the rhetorical act so as to foreground certain issues and to repress, occlude or ignore others; such foregroundings and occlusions are a necessary part of getting words together, and in most situations writers are not best served by that repression of practical exigencies and that foregrounding of indeterminacy for which theoretical pedagogues like Knoblauch and Brannon call. It may be true (I don't think so, but it may be) that the individual writer creates the world anew with every authentic piece of writing, but I'm absolutely certain that there are relatively few writing situations, inside or outside academe, where that is a useful truth to foreground during the writing act.

At the pedagogical level, historical rhetoric works because it was to a large extent originated for the teaching situation. The five canons and so on make, not a universal truth or platonic idea, but an educational shorthand, a quick way of broadening students' understanding. My honors students—young, privileged, temporarily distanced from economic realities, anxious to participate as recognized equals in adult debate—reproduce, as they sit down to write an essay for

a government or ethics course, a rhetorical situation that classical rhetoric served well for nearly two thousand years; their exigencies parallel the ones Isocrates might have recognized.

When the writing context is narrowed to the immediate social group, and foregrounds the opportunity that linguistic display gives for personal display and social dominance, they approximate to the adolescent inns-of-courtiers in the Renaissance, though along with the heady psychological liberation of figurative invention, they usually reproduce also the puritanical guilt, the linguistic self-distrust, the fear of being exposed and ridiculous, that historically dethroned the Renaissance rhetoric of display.

Once questions of taste, and reader-reaction, and real-life social acceptability, are brought under discussion, the eighteenth-century Scottish theorists still offer a lot of ideas that are relevant, preoccupied as Boswell's generation was with social acceptance by an alien elite; a lot of higher education is really about upward mobility and social acculturation, and eighteenth-century Scotsmen were a lot more explicit and clearheaded on the issue than most of us in the twentieth-century.

Then students face and will face in later life frequent writing situations (lab reports, factual narratives, business analyses) that, in their informational emphasis, closed formal constraints and tight deadlines, correspond closely to the context from which Spencer and Bain developed their psychologically-derived editorial theory. Many students are fascinated by the *typographic* variety of all 19th century textbook material; they are both fascinated and appalled at the obviously under-researched and primitive linguistic and psychological concepts underpinning the confident prescriptions of current-traditionalism; they are very open to the idea that Spencer and Bain didn't get these things right first time, and that modern research will have found out more about readers process texts. But they also come to realize that the current-traditionalist emphasis on predictable

schemes for information-processing is not in itself either true or untrue, but simply something worth foregrounding in particular writing tasks. There are some days or situations where we all need to think like nineteenth-century technicians.

Now, in principle, an advanced writing course based in this metatheoretical, or deliberately disjunctive, approach, could be structured in many ways, not only on historical contrasts. Richard Fulkerson has proposed a similarly conceived course based on contrasting schools of modern composition theory. The next time I teach Studies in Writing I've promised myself to rework it, for my own education, as a serious course in writing across the disciplines, tackling how and why texts are produced in different fields and professions, not just looking at belletristic essays from various subject areas. What all three of these course structures (historical, theoretical, disciplinary-empirical) share, however, is a concern that advanced writing involve critical consciousness—not just particular writing skills nor indoctrination in a single preferred theory, however philosophically desirable, but a sophistication of attitude towards both rhetorical theory and the writing act. Realistically used, historical rhetoric educates students in this essential critical consciousness.

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