

Composition Is Not Rhetoric

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Composition, as it has been practiced in the required first-year course for more than 100 years, has nothing whatever to do with rhetoric.

The disciplinary yoking of the terms "rhetoric" and "composition" in English departments has only two kinds of justification, one historical and the other political. The historical yoking goes something like this: In ancient times composition, including literary composition, was considered to lie within the province of rhetoric (Kennedy 112-13). In *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, Jeffrey Walker demonstrates the complex intertwining of rhetorical and literary composition from the time of Hesiod through the early centuries CE. Greek and Roman rhetoricians taught the art of composition to young boys from the Hellenistic period through the end of the Roman Empire. Quintilian gives copious advice about composition in books II and X of the *Institutes of Oratory*. It is no accident that Longinus' "On the Sublime"—a text from the first century CE that was a favorite of modern literary critics—is organized according to the five canons of rhetoric, or that Chaucer learned about poetic composition by reading the work of the rhetorician Geoffrey de Vinsauf. The traditional association of rhetoric with literary composition lasted a long time in the West. Milton, Swift, and Pope, for example, can be called "rhetors" without apology in the sense that they invented works which they hoped would intervene in civic discourse, using topics, genres, conventions, and figures taught in school by rhetoricians (Clark). This history of close ties between rhetoric and composition ended in the late-nineteenth century, though, when "composition" acquired a new meaning and a new praxis. These were given it by the Arnoldian humanists who invented the first-year requirement, and who went out of their way to kill off the vestiges of rhetorical study that remained in American colleges at the time.

That's the historical connection between rhetoric and composition. The second, political, connection has been in play for only about forty years. Here rhetoric is yoked to composition as a means of securing status for composition teachers. Any such effort to lend respectability to composition, it must be said, puts rhetoric at the service of composition, hence inverting the historical relationship between the two arts. Nonetheless, such efforts are periodically made. During the 1960s and '70s, for example, a number of English-rhetoricians (E. P. J. Corbett, Frank D'Angelo, and Ross Winterowd, among others) tried to insert rhetoric into current thinking about composition, writing journal articles and textbooks that reviewed the mutual history of the two arts and articulated possible contemporary connections between them.¹ Despite the stature of these rhetoricians, their attempt to inoculate composition with rhetoric did not take. Newer editions of Corbett's 1965 textbook on classical rhetoric are still in use among graduate students, but the book has never been widely used in the first-year course for which it was intended. D'Angelo's and Winterowd's rhetoric-based textbooks were popular only for a short time, and their innovative scholarship in rhetorical theory is seldom cited by composition researchers today. The number of articles on rhetoric published in *CCC* began to diminish during the 1970s amid excitement over the new process pedagogy. In the forty years since these efforts were made, first-year composition has become more firmly entrenched in university curricula than ever before. Advanced degrees in Composition Studies can now be pursued in at least two strong

graduate programs which are located at very good schools (Wisconsin and Illinois). Apparently, students can complete degrees in these programs without necessarily encountering rhetorical studies.

I began by asserting that composition has nothing whatever to do with rhetoric. I can now insert the adjective "modern" in front of "composition" to indicate that when I refer to composition from here on out I mean the course that is required of all first-year college students. As far as I can see, there is no necessary reason that rhetoric could not be taught in this course. However, it is not. I begin to substantiate this claim by mounting a stipulative definition of rhetoric: any theoretical discourse that is entitled to be called "rhetoric" must at minimum conceive of rhetoric as an art of invention, that is, it must give a central place to the systematic discovery and investigation of the available arguments in a given situation. Furthermore, it must conceive of the arguments generated by rhetorical invention as both produced and circulated within a network of social and civic discourse, images, and events. As ancient rhetors such as Gorgias and Cicero argued in theory and personified in practice, any practice entitled to be called "rhetoric" must intervene in some way in social and civic discursive networks.

Kevin DeLuca, a Speech-rhetorician, agrees in part with my stipulation.² He defines rhetoric as "the mobilization of signs for the articulation of identities, ideologies, consciousnesses, communities, publics, and cultures" (17). Anyone who teaches first-year composition must admit, I think, that instruction in the "mobilization of signs" in order to articulate identities, ideologies, and so on is not a regular part of the curriculum of that course, unless the writing of personal essays can be called "articulation of identities." But DeLuca means the term "articulation" in a technical sense borrowed from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe; he is not referring to the display of personal qualities or experiences that is ordinarily expected in the essay assignment typically used in first-year composition classes.

I am aware that there are composition theorists and teachers who attempt to achieve the goal of civic commitment in their first-year courses. They are to be praised and encouraged. However, most teachers and theorists who orient first-year instruction toward civic intervention are motivated not by their studies of rhetoric but rather by Marx and neo-marxist theorists such as Gramsci and Althusser, or else they take their cue from the brand of cultural studies associated with the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. The alignment of both of these schools of thought with civic intervention is obvious, although the civic or worldly commitment of cultural studies, as it is practiced in English departments, is somewhat less clear and steady. The point that interests me, however, is that first-year pedagogies such as service learning have not, by and large, been inspired by the study of rhetoric. Hence they retain no necessary commitment to invention. For me, it is rhetoric's attention to invention that differentiates it from all other practices and fields of study.

In order to establish the centrality of invention to rhetoric I turn to the work of Charles Sears Baldwin. Baldwin was a historian of rhetoric who taught in eastern American universities at the turn of the twentieth century, and so he had a front-row seat at the birth of modern composition. He wrote current-traditional textbooks, but he also wrote quite wonderful histories of the relation between rhetoric and poetics during premodern eras. In these works he consistently distinguishes rhetoric from something he calls "sophistry": "Rhetoric is conceived by Aristotle as the art of

giving effectiveness to truth; it is conceived alike by the earlier and the later sophists and by their successors as the art of giving effectiveness to the speaker" (3). According to Baldwin, Aristotle taught that "rhetoric is so inextricably moral that it should never be divorced from subject matter of real significance" (5). Despite Aristotle's influential example, Baldwin thinks, throughout the history of rhetoric in the West, rhetorical practice and pedagogy have fallen into sophistry: "what has intervened to deviate rhetoric and frustrate its best use has again and again been the preoccupation with giving effectiveness not to the message, but to the speaker" (4). This "false conception" of rhetoric "led ancient rhetoric through empty personal triumphs into an elaborate art of display, devoid, at its worst, of other motive" (4).

Now it is hard to resist the assumption that Baldwin is concerned with this distinction because he had witnessed just such a shift in educational practice during his career. That is to say, Baldwin may have felt that modern composition, with its emphasis on self-expression rather than on matters of public policy, was a contemporary sophistry. Certainly the humanist cult of self-expression that dominated turn-of-the-century composition pedagogy, with its insistence on the personal essay, can be called an art of display with some justice. In any case, Baldwin nicely makes the point that rhetoric cannot thrive without invention, without the canon that ties it to social and public use:

For sophistic is the historic demonstration of what oratory becomes when it is removed from urgency of subject matter. Seeking some inspiration for public occasions, it revives over and over again a dead past. Thus becoming conventionalized in method, it turns from cogency of movement to the cultivation of style. Cogency presupposes a message. It is intellectual ordering for persuasion, the means toward making men [*sic*] believe and act. . . . The old lore of investigation (*inventio*), paralyzed by the compression of its trunk nerve, has little scope beyond ingenuity. Organized movement (*dispositio*), similarly impaired at the source, tends to be reduced to salience and variety or to be supplanted by pattern. (7)

He is writing here about the Second Sophistic (0-400 CE), but his comments can easily be applied to current-traditional rhetoric, where invention was reduced to selection of a subject to write about and where arrangement was reified into the five-paragraph theme. I fear that his analysis also describes much of process pedagogy that is practiced inside the first-year requirement.

The fact is that the situation of the first-year composition course, inside a universal requirement, staffed by a scandalously low-paid and contingently-hired faculty (no matter how capable and well qualified), renders intellectual sophistication a luxury. Furthermore, intellectual sophistication that immerses students and teachers in political and social critique, as a full-blown course in rhetoric would do, is dangerous for contingently-employed teachers, particularly in times like the present, when the prevailing regime of truth carefully monitors teachers to insure their intellectual conformity. So I do not have high hopes for a rapprochement between rhetoric and composition; indeed, at this moment in time I am very concerned about the very survival of the academic study of rhetoric. But that is a topic for another paper.

Endnotes

¹ I use the term "English-rhetorician" to refer to a scholar whose research interest is rhetoric but who is affiliated with an English department. This term distinguishes such scholars from their counterparts in Departments of Communication, who, for historical reasons, I label "Speech-rhetoricians." Corbett's textbook was *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (1965); D'Angelo's was *Process and Thought in Composition* (1977), and Winterowd's was called *The Contemporary Writer* (1975). D'Angelo also produced a theory of discourse entitled *A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric* (1975), while Winterowd attempted to synthesize ancient and modern rhetorical traditions in *Rhetoric: A Synthesis* (1968). In addition, all three published articles in *CCC* and elsewhere during the 1960s and '70s advocating the adoption of rhetorical principles and practices in first-year composition.

² DeLuca attributes the generation of this definition to conversations with Barbara Biesecker (167). As Speech-rhetoricians, DeLuca and Biesecker are more firmly in touch both with the history of rhetoric and with contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism than are most contemporary compositionists. Rhetoricians affiliated with English departments tend to be somewhat more familiar with the history of rhetoric than they are with contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism.

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As nouns the difference between composition and rhetoric is that composition is the proportion of different parts to make a whole while rhetoric is the art of using language, especially public speaking, as a means to persuade. As an adjective rhetoric is . . . composition. English. (wikipedia composition). Noun. (en noun). My objection is not merely political; it is also pedagogical, since "rhetoric and composition" forecloses many other valuable ways of teaching reading and writing. How Critical Thinking Evolved Into Rhetoric. From the middle of the last century until fairly recently, the idea that the purpose of undergraduate education is to foster "critical thinking" has had a virtual monopoly in both academic and popular circles.