

At the Bar

RHETORIC IN THE CLASSROOM: SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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In her essay "Journal Writing: Rolfing in Reverse," in the September, 1978, issue of Media and Methods, Neva Daniel says that

the single most important value to be gained from education is a positive self-image. Two years ago, the Progoff method of intensive journal writing arrived in my life like a tidal wave of effectiveness for accomplishing this purpose (p. 50).

In the same issue of Media and Methods, G. Lynn Nelson begins his essay "Learning from Within: Ira Progoff and the Power of Personal Writing" with this:

Personal writing is writing with myself as audience. It is writing to discover what I know and what I feel; through seeing what I say. Someone once noted that every I is a we, and personal writing is a process of allowing the many that make up me to talk to each other and to learn to live comfortably with each other (p. 49).

"But what do you do with this stuff if you want to get into the University of Michigan?" a student once asked us. If personal writing is the exclusive frame of reference, students end up frustrated. They feel that they need to communicate with the outside world in a practical, efficient manner. Clearly, personal writing exercises may be essential heuristic devices in developing a writer's writing consciousness; but when left to itself, personal writing does not satisfy those aspects of self-image which are tied to how a person is received by the outside world.

When a student was presented with a pre-writing exercise of Macrorie's at a University of Michigan workshop titled "Alternatives to the Five-Paragraph theme," he asked: "Now what do I do with it?"

The response was, "Take one of the 'things' and develop an essay from it."

A bewildered look accompanied the next question: "What 'things'?"

The non-reply was, "I suppose I am using 'things' differently from the way most English teachers use 'things.'"

What specificity, what logical direction comes next? More free writing, more journals? More of the same solipsism, or a new direction which combines the processes into a continuing development of composing skills?

Instruction in rhetoric provides a viable amalgam of some personal writing and some communication with the outside world. Rhetoric acknowledges the self in invention while validating the real world and the necessity of making contact with it. Instruction in rhetoric, derived from the classical rhetoricians, provides a comprehensive, practical means to assist student essayists in the exploration, development, and refinement of their written communication. Invention, style, and audience become critical considerations in helping them mature as writers.

Invention

For developing writers rhetoric encourages originality of thought while giving them a structural frame of reference. In Errors and Expectations, Mina Shaughnessy notes the particular problems of developing student writers who must first labor with invention:

For the BW student, instruction in organization must begin, not with the techniques writers use to help their readers follow them, but with the more fundamental processes whereby writers get their thoughts in the first place and then get them under way....Yet students are not always certain of how a writer recognizes a main idea when he has one or how he sets about finding one if he doesn't (p. 245).

Invention today must mean more than Cicero's "discovery of valid arguments"

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if teachers are to assist developing writers. Teachers must be concerned with how heuristics can give developing writers systematic ways to examine their thoughts and feelings. One practical exercise which allows for exploration and invention is the use of audio-visual slides to provoke student responses: getting them to see contrasts, to ask what something means, to group observations, to describe what their eyes reveal.

Kenneth Burke's pentad developed in his Grammar of Motives is another way for initiating discoveries. The pentad of heuristic probes--act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose--suggests questions such as what was done? where? by whom? how? and why?

Burke's probes, coupled with audio-visuals, raise questions while students view slides or hear tapes and recordings. The students may respond to the stimuli orally or in written lists of words, phrases, or sentences. Gradually they understand that the questions are a regimen; then the instructor requires that the students ask their own questions; ultimately the instructor requests that they chart and compile their facts, observations, opinions. Feelings need not be neglected in this process. What students feel about the subject and what they value must be explored also. Students learn through differences in opinions, perceptions, and feelings, that they have a tremendous responsibility to communicate clearly and effectively if others are to understand them.

The instructor's role is to facilitate awareness. Out of awareness come assertions and judgments in sentences, and perhaps paragraphs. Coterminous with these assertions and judgments is the students' obligation to describe clearly and to explain clearly. After all, their audience may not know what they know, may not feel what they feel, may not assert what they assert. What can they do to structure their ideas to most effectively reach that audience?

In Classical Rhetoric for the Modern

Student, Edward P. J. Corbett outlines the problems of structure which face developing students. Dispelling inertia and helping students make potential choices is the teacher's task.

The difficulty everyone has, in varying degrees, in putting thoughts into language stems partly from the inertia that must be overcome at the beginning of any task, partly from the lack of something to say, partly from indecisiveness about what to say first, and partly from the variety of possible ways to say something. (p. 414).

Corbett's methods present precepts and materials for imitation, but he asserts: "One learns to write by writing" (p. 416).

Sentence combining is another method by which students both imitate and develop correct and effective styles. Students follow a set pattern of grammatically correct English sentences which supply them with the appropriate patterns for imitation. When working with sentence combining exercises, students are asked to make stylistic choices between and within sentences. As an additional benefit, this type of exercise can and does overcome the inertia of the blank page.

Arrangement

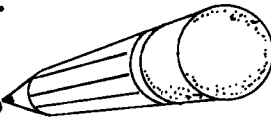
Invention goes beyond exploration to a practical method of arriving at thesis, of discovering potential arrangements for the development of the thesis. As Sheridan Baker remarks in The Practical Stylist: "If you do not find a thesis, your essay will be a tour through the miscellaneous" (p. 2). The instructor moves students toward assertions and judgments regarding a subject. Although anthologies of essays have been used typically to stimulate these thesis statements, the use of "cases" is also an effective means for getting students actively engaged in thinking problems through to written thesis statements.

Through discussion, disagreement and agreement, the students begin to acknowledge cogent statements about the subject

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which must be supported; inherent patterns of arrangements are discovered in the cases and their potential solutions. Field and Weiss's Cases for Composition serves as an excellent example of textbook cases designed for "practical writing situations." The instructor assists in the discovery process, not only in what can be asserted, but also in discovering potential arrangements which may be exploited to advance the writer's point of view. The instructor encourages recognition of diverse points of view, what must be done to prepare the audience for the reception of the point-to-be-made, what clarification must take place before the audience can fully accept a proposition or solution.

Some work in imitation of models is also appropriate. Pauline Christiansen's From Inside Out can be used to stimulate discussion, thesis creation, and finally imitation. The text has copious essays from student and professional writers which serve as functional models for student writing. As the regular students move through the semester, the instructor guides them from the dynamics of exposition to the dynamics of persuasion, a fuller consideration of the audience's shaping force in the presentation of the information and argument.

Writer's point of view 

Thus, as student writing matures, the students are led from the logic and reasonableness of order in thought to the logic and reasonableness of structures that may effectively influence the reader's point of view. One method of focusing instruction on point of view is to use ethical problems and moral dilemmas for classroom analysis and discussion. The Aristotelian topics provide a reference for inquiry. Students acquire some sense of the variety of value systems among them and the elusiveness of absolute truth. D'Angelo in Process and Thought in

Composition also provides a set of basic questions which assist in the examination of audience (p. 20).

The instructor, through exercises, can focus students' attention on his audience. Rogerian argument provides one such exercise mode. Young, Becker, and Pike's Rhetoric: Discovery and Change provides a guide to Rogerian strategy as does Hairston's A Contemporary Rhetoric. The exercises guide students into careful choices of evidence and examples known to specific audiences and respected by them.

Style

Writers can begin to understand and develop their own styles as they have understood the devices of invention, of arrangement, of evaluating audience, and of argument. In Understanding Arguments: Introduction to Informal Logic, Robert J. Fogelin suggests that a first step in the close analysis of an argument is to label the various argumentative components. Fogelin gives a series of examples which show students the uses of these stylistic devices both in being persuaded and in persuading. Students can be asked to rewrite a persuasive essay which has a particular slant, to redirect the writing to a different audience. By redirecting their thesis statements, by rearranging their essays, by redesigning their argumentative points, writers can appeal to a different audience and persuade them to new points of view. This exercise reinforces students' understanding that style adjusts as purpose and audience change.

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