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Pedagogy of the Impressed: Teaching Comp *and* Lit to the “Boys in the Back Two Rows”

The whale didn't kill Ahab. Melville did.

Jerry Cleaver, *Immediate Fiction*

“Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.”

The Wizard, *The Wizard of Oz*

I'm convinced that Composition is a discipline precisely as Stanley Fish defines it – namely, “it's what we do around here.” In other words, if we can agree on “what we do around here” then we're members of a discipline. And I believe that a statement of what we do around here has never been better expressed than by David Bartholomae in his now canonical essay “Inventing the University”:

The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with this audience, as though he were a member of the academy... He has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language... He must learn to speak our language.

That in a nutshell summarizes what we do around here – teach our students how to speak our language and dare to speak it before they have learned the skill. The big question, though, is precisely *how* do we teach our students these skills and figuring that out is what takes up most of our time every day, as it will take up our time this morning.

The problem is that there seem to be so many ways to address this problem. For example, a long time ago in a universe far, far away, the answer seemed to be what James Berlin called in

what has become a derisive term, “current traditional rhetoric” featuring what Berlin calls “superficial correctness,” which prompts the remark of a new acquaintance when they find out that you’re an English teacher, “I’d better watch my grammar!” In an almost equally distant but parallel universe there arose what Berlin calls “Expressionistic Rhetoric,” a genre that has seems to have lost popularity due to the over-eagerness by some students to “spill their guts” (forcing the teacher to figure out if they should report the student to the police) or to the unwillingness of others to write revealing personal essays, resulting in lower grades if they don’t or trauma if they do.

Berlin finishes off his taxonomy with his “Social Rhetoric” category, one that has flourished over the years, blossoming into such areas as “critical pedagogy,” which requires students to focus their writing on the supposed causes of and solutions to social injustice; or on “service learning,” which can include critical pedagogy but incorporates student writing into ongoing (and often non-academic) social organizations; and or on special projects where students can focus their writing pretty much on areas that interest them, such as the “Situated Writing” program at UIC where students take on subjects such as “The Sheffield Landmark District.”

None of these writing projects, however, has anything to do with literature. In fact, the politics of the English department are such that today the only thing that Rhetoric and Composition faculty share with their Literature colleagues is often a building and a budget, and the trend nowadays is to split apart even those uniting elements so in some universities, Rhetoric and Composition is an entirely different department housed in separate quarters with a separate faculty and a separate budget. So on one hand, there’s lit; and on the other there’s comp.

Put simply, the culture of composition classrooms – whether “regular” or “development” or combined – seems to be disconnected from the classrooms where the topic is literature (or, at

the higher levels, critical theory). What we do in one classroom isn't at all what we do in the other. For a little while in the mid-1990's, it looked like Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate might stir up some professional discussion with their dueling essays (and subsequent comments, responses, and follow-up articles spanning several issues of *College English*) that debated whether literature belongs in the freshman composition classroom – Erika says “No!” and Gary “Yes!”

In Lindemann's eyes, studying literature is inimical to composition: “If students get to write a paper or two, they must assume a disembodied voice as they analyze the ingrown toenail motif in *Beowulf*... Teaching literature offers the writing teacher no model worth emulating” (314). Tate is a little more tolerant, admitting that “imaginative literature should not be the only kind of reading required of our composition students” (319). But on the other hand he argues that “we are very close to turning freshman composition into the ultimate ‘service course’ for all the other disciplines in the academy. Does our discipline... exist in the cause of nothing more than better sociology and biology papers?” (319).

Unfortunately, the debate was short-lived, and the question for the most part remains unanswered: Can literature and composition not only find a way to get along but actually survive and even thrive in the developmental classroom? I do find hope, however, in a *College English* essay by that renowned writing teacher and scholar Peter Elbow at least expresses that possibility:

I start with a sentence that makes me nervous: “I miss literature. I miss having works of literature central in some of my teaching. I miss the comfort and pleasure of ... try(ing) to get inside of and be stretched or even transformed by a text that is miraculously good.

(535)

Fortunately, Elbow isn't the only one.

The answer to whether comp and lit belong in the same classroom comes from perhaps the most famous yet all too often unacknowledged former “developmental” student – none other than Gerald Graff, now Professor of English and Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, former President of the Modern Language Association, and author of several canonical books that address this issue from his early *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* and to the most recent edition of *They Say/ I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, perhaps the best-selling textbook on writing ever published. Graff seems almost obsessed with finding a way to incorporate reading and writing, literature and rhetoric, perhaps because it was this combination that helped him overcome the fact that he “disliked and feared books at an early age,” particularly history and literature (*Beyond the Culture Wars* 64). So his answer to the whether rhetoric and composition belong together is a resounding “Yes!”

In fact, what made Graff realize that literature could be interesting was his discovery that that rhetoric could unlock the doors of literary works that at the time seemed to him irrelevant. In other words, the goal of literary studies need not be merely finding new ways “to say smart things about these works in a vacuum... addressed to nobody and delivered from outer space” but rather to engage in “intense debates” (“How ‘bout that Wordsworth” 3). In Graff’s world, therefore, literary study emerges from the self-contained world of New Criticism and enters into the “real world” of rhetorical studies.

Unfortunately, Graff’s initial solution for incorporating literature and composition consists of a strategy that he calls “teaching the conflicts,” an approach that would require a level of engagement with literary texts that, while avoiding the “decontextualized literary essay,” is still far beyond the ken of our ALP students, if not the vast majority of first-year students regardless of their level of reading and writing abilities. In this approach, what gives texts

rhetorical interest is the debate over how to interpret them. Graff's examples are Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the text that first brought rhetorical light to the long night of literary irrelevancy to the young Graff in his undergraduate days. For example, to approach *The Tempest*, as a rhetorical problem, Graff would have students model the debate between his dueling (and apocryphal) Postcolonialist and Traditionalist Professors; and for *Huck Finn*, to engage in a discussion about racial overtones in the book.

However, for our students – “The Boys in the Back Two Rows” – to take on the rhetorical controversy regarding the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* that first intrigued Graff or to plunge into a debate between the materialist concerns of a post-colonial critical theorist and the aesthetic values of a New Critical aesthete hardly seems appropriate. In other words, the problem with Graff's “teaching the conflicts” approach is that it may actually exacerbate the problem. If students aren't much interested in literature or rhetoric to begin with, then studying the rhetorical conflicts between differing approaches to literature that they really don't care anything about will only make matters worse.

Fortunately, there is a rhetorical door that's just the right size, one that allows literature to be brought into the composition classroom by imagining it both as a rhetorical force within literature, acting persuasively on and through characters to drive the plot, and as a force outside it, acting persuasively on and through the reader to drive a response to that literature. Put simply, literature can be seen as the work of the persuasive power of language acting on characters – and the power of language acting just as persuasively on readers. And furthermore, these rhetorical forces are thoroughly and completely available for all students at all levels of composition study in exactly the same way that we have been teaching rhetoric and composition all along – primarily through the Aristotelian appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos. The following are some

examples of how I use rhetoric to teach literature – and literature to teach rhetoric – in the “basic” (i.e., the non-credit) freshman composition course at the University of Oklahoma.

First, instead of a traditional grammar and composition textbook, I use Graff and Birkenstein’s writing manual *They Say/I Say* as a way to introduce forms of academic argument into student writing by applying their templates to fiction as well as to essays. As you can see by the essay assignment, the students use the templates to construct their essay – starting with the “they say,” or the assumptions and commonplaces that create the setting and dramatic purpose of the story. The “I say” is the essential conflict – what I find helpful to call the “closer look” – in other words, the action that complicates and usually contradicts a commonplace. The rhetorical analysis will demonstrate how the author uses ethos, pathos, and logos both to build the story and to persuade the readers that the story is worth their effort. As you can see, the assigned prompt doesn’t exactly fit the traditional freshman comp non-fiction reading-response “thesis, support, and conclusion” model. Essentially, students are asked to apply the Graff/ Birkenstein templates to literary rather than expository texts.

I have provided samples of how three of my “basic” writing students addressed this assignment. First, let’s take a closer look at how Maylinh Cruz applied the prompt to Langston Hughes’s story “Thank You Ma’am,” which as you may recall is the tale of how Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones was able to “tame” (in the words of *The Little Prince*) Roger, the boy who attacks her in the street, and turn his life around, at least for a few hours, by the application of what Robert Duvall might call “tender mercies.”

Common sense seems to indicate that when a street thug tries to steal a woman’s purse late at night in the street she should let go and give into the attacker’s demands.

Therefore, in the situation that Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones finds herself, it is

surprising that she fights back. She kicks and grabs the boy by the shirt, demands that he pick up her pocketbook, and takes him to her home.

In rhetorical terms, Maylinh has been able to identify, explain, and develop a thesis about the “commonplace” – the “they say,” “what most people think,” “it’s common to believe that.”

She also analyzes how Hughes uses Aristotle’s three methods of rhetorical persuasion – “ethos, pathos, and logos” – to establish the credibility of his characters and create the dramatic conflict that drives the story. Again, in Maylinh’s words,

Hughes is able to make both characters believable because at the beginning of the story he describes Mrs. Jones as a “...large woman with a large purse that has everything in it but a hammer and nails”; and then the boy as “frail and a willow-wild.” This makes the readers believe that the story could happen as Hughes describes it.

I can’t think of a better example of a student’s ability to establish an academic argument of the effectiveness of a literary work by using rhetorical terms.

Next, it’s clear that Kelly Ferster is equally fluent in her use of rhetorical terms to develop and support a thesis about “The Medicine Bag,” a coming of age story about how a young teen-age boy comes to accept his Indian heritage through his relationship with his grandfather.

We are convinced that Sneve proves that children who are coming of age encounter problems of self-identity with her effective use of ethos, pathos, and logos. First, Sneve is able to make her characters believable and credible through the use of ethos. Also, she makes an effective use of pathos – stirring up the emotions of her audience – when she has the grandpa faint and then explains that he is lonely all the way up in Iowa. Last but not least, the logos or logic of the story also supports the commonplace. When you come

of age, you start to have problems with self-identity. For example, when grandpa comes to visit the family, the great-grandson becomes embarrassed that his grandpa does not live up to how he presented him to his friends.

To me, this is a wonderful example of how rhetorical analysis can be used to teach literature – and literature can be used to teach rhetorical analysis.

Finally, let's have a look at how Gerald Wilson makes effective use of the Graff and Birkenstein templates to analyze "The Scarlet Ibis," Hurst's tragically powerful story of when brotherly love meets human pride:

It's often said that brothers should get along and take care of each other. However, a closer look reveals that the bond the two brothers have in the "Scarlet Ibis" not the stereotypical one that most people might believe brothers should have. First Doodle gets to live only after his brother sees a slight smile on his face while contemplating smothering him. He then gets the name "Doodle" only after his brother decides William Alexander is not good enough. And he finally learns to walk and run only after his brother feels ashamed and embarrassed to have a crippled brother.

What's remarkable about all of these examples is the extent of control that these developmental students have over academic language.

In addition to using rhetorical language to analyze a literary text, students also learn rhetorical skills by using this language to gain power over these texts as literary critics – being able to compare and contrast their value as pieces of literature. This was the goal in the assignment that asked them to synthesize the three stories, comparing and contrasting their use of ethos, pathos, and logos. Again, the prompt is not a typical example of a freshman comp

assignment. Connor Vasa does a particularly good job of responding to the prompt, particularly in his concluding remarks:

After comparing each story based on how well the author uses ethos, pathos, and logos to persuade us of their story's authenticity, it seems clear that "Scarlet Ibis" is the best story because how effective the author uses Aristotle appeals. The author leaves no doubt that his characters are not one hundred percent believable unlike the other two stories. This proves the authenticity of the pathos we felt throughout the story were real. Lastly he has a strong moral that is applicable throughout the story. It is qualities like these that make this story more genuine than the rest.

Not bad for a "developmental" writer! But the benefits of combining rhetoric and literature don't stop with analyzing stories; they also are tremendously beneficial in teaching students that all writing – even literature – is rhetorically constructed. (The photo here is the cover of Lennard Davis's book *Resisting Novels* in which he argues that all fiction is both highly ideological and therefore highly persuasive – so you might have to resist a novel, even though you might like it!)

In other words, as independent creative writing instructor and story consultant Jerry Cleaver so succinctly puts the matter: "The whale didn't kill Ahab. Melville did." If Graff was astounded when he realized that critics disagreed on interpretation and debated these issues vociferously, he should see my students when they realize that stories consist of readily-understood constructions of both grammar and rhetoric that are easily available to them just as they are to professionals! It's amazing what happens when the magic disappears, and we find out who is really behind the curtain. Students realize that they have power over text – which it seems to me is precisely the objective that we're looking for in our composition classrooms.

Finally, therefore, rhetoric can also give students power over creating text, using grammar and rhetoric to create their own versions of the texts that they have been reading. Let's have a look at how Maylinh Cruz (obviously one of my better students) handled the assignment.

READ MAYLINH

In conclusion, the point I think is clear – not only can literature be a part of the composition classroom it should be because it enables students to accomplish precisely what our job description says they should accomplish. Again in David Bartholomae's words, "The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with this audience, as though he would a member of the academy... He has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language... He must learn to speak our language." It seems to me that when students use rhetorical language to analyze and create literature, they are doing precisely that.