

Ancient Rhetoric and Modern Literacy

It is widely perceived that today's college students do not write as well as their predecessors. At CSLA over 50% of faculty surveyed disagreed with the statement "CSULA students are able to write at the college level." Is this literacy crisis real? If it is real, is it new? If we read *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* by James Berlin it is clear that the crisis is anything but new. Berlin reports that in 1892, 47% of the students writing the entrance exam at Harvard "passed unsatisfactorily," 2% passed "with credit," and 20% failed altogether (Berlin *Writing Instruction* 100).

The Board of Overseers at Harvard appointed a committee to investigate the difficulties of teaching English A, which had been established in 1874 as the first Freshman English course ever. After studying the above mentioned entrance exams and selected themes, the committee concluded that the preparatory schools were failing and that these schools should immediately turn their attention to writing instruction in greater earnest. The committee argued that writing instruction was the responsibility of lower schools and that colleges should be concerned with more advanced skills. The recommended solution was to raise the standards of the entrance exam.

This should all sound quite familiar. One hundred years later we are still making the same complaints, offering the same solutions, and asking the same questions. Why do our students write poorly? How do we teach students to speak and write well? In reality, these are ancient questions that go back to the origins of rhetoric.

The Beginnings of Rhetoric

George Kennedy argues that the conceptualization of rhetoric began in Syracuse after 467 B.C., when Athenian style democracy was imposed. In Athens, there was a long tradition of public speaking in the law courts and in the assembly, and most citizens had opportunities to perfect their skills through observation and imitation. The citizens of Syracuse suddenly found themselves losing their shirts (or togas) in the law courts and realized that they had to develop public speaking skills quickly. Soon rhetoric teachers arose, and handbooks were written, copied and sold. This is the beginning of "technical" rhetoric, a handbook tradition focused on practical civic discourse. The remains of this early tradition can be seen in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and arguably even in the current edition of the *Harbrace Handbook*. However, as we shall see, current handbooks focus more on style than on any other rhetorical factor.

Sophistic Rhetoric

A second strand of ancient rhetoric that flourished in the fourth century B.C. is "sophistic" rhetoric, identified with famous teachers (or Sophists) such as Gorgias and Isocrates. This rhetoric emphasized stylistic ornamentation and auditory effects. Kennedy says the oratory of Gorgias was "a tintinnabulation of rhyming words and echoing rhythms."

Plato attacks this rhetoric as being like an art of cookery, a mode of flattery with no real subject matter. The Sophists were also accused of "making the better appear the worse, and the worse appear the better," without any regard for truth. Sophistic rhetoric tends to draw attention to the speaker in the manner of superstar operatic singers and rock stars. Like technical rhetoric, sophistic rhetoric has gone in and out of fashion over the centuries.

Philosophical Rhetoric

The third strand is called "philosophical" rhetoric. Aristotle argues that the function of rhetoric as an art is to "discover the available means of persuasion" and "to deal with things about which we deliberate, but for which we have no

systematic rules." He sees it as a practical counterpart to the more certain and systematic reasoning of dialectic. As such, rhetoric deals with probable rather than necessary truths.

For Plato, however, this is exactly the problem—rhetoric persuades without discovering the truth or instructing its auditors. Even with Plato's objection, Classical rhetoric, mostly of the Roman variety developed by Cicero and Quintilian, composed an important part of the educational curriculum in the West until the late 18th Century.

The Five Offices of Rhetoric

Classical rhetoric taught invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. The relative prominence of these five "offices" of rhetoric, as they came to be called, is the major difference among subsequent rhetorics. As literacy and writing became more important, memory and delivery were de-emphasized. Through the middle ages and into the Renaissance the importance of style increased while that of invention waned.

Over the years invention has meant everything from the discovery of the arguments available to win a case in the law courts to the discovery of the ultimate cosmic truth. Aristotle discusses three categories of invention: *ethos*, or appeals to the character or authority of the speaker; *logos*, or appeals to logic or rational argument; and *pathos*, appeals to the emotions or feelings of the audience. In the last century, the rhetoric taught in American schools has tended to focus on rational arguments only, treat invention as part of arrangement, or deny that invention is a legitimate part of rhetoric at all (Berlin *Writing Instruction* 64-65).

The appeal to *pathos* has been seen as especially problematic in a scientific age. However, it is clear that modern politicians and advertisers have no reservations about any of Aristotle's categories of argument.

Rhetoric in America

Berlin's history of writing instruction in America provides an interesting view of the relationship of rhetoric and society. The Puritan colonists brought with them the Renaissance rhetoric of Peter Ramus, who was associated with disestablished religious sects and had designed his rhetoric in opposition to Aristotle's. This rhetoric, essentially a sophistic approach which emphasized stylistic ornamentation, was dominant in the colonies until 1730. In a religious community where truth was not something to be discovered or disputed, invention was de-emphasized.

However, as the colonial economy developed and trade with England became important, the curriculum in American colleges was brought back in line with that in English universities, and Classical rhetoric returned to dominance. Berlin points out that this move from a rhetoric of ornament to a rhetoric of persuasion ironically aided the colonists in addressing issues that would eventually lead to the Revolutionary War (Berlin 13). Sophistic rhetoric is not very effective in rallying people to causes, while Aristotle's serves this purpose well.

The Newtonian World

By the late eighteenth century the Aristotelian world view had been replaced by a Newtonian one, and a new scientific rhetoric was required. American educators turned to Scottish Common-Sense Realism and three new rhetorical textbooks: George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, and Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric*. The rhetoric of these books was a thoroughly eighteenth century product, grounded in a positivist epistemology, a faculty psychology, and a mechanistic view of language. Although these textbooks fell out of use after the Civil War,

they were replaced by American adaptations which emphasized their most mechanistic tendencies.

Scientific Observation

In eighteenth century rhetoric, invention was replaced with scientific observation. Berlin notes, "For Campbell, learning takes place in three ways, and only three ways: sensation, the direct experience of the world; memory, the recollection of sensation; and imagination, the consciousness of what we do not directly know through sensation of memory" (23). Thus the orator's (or writer's) task is to reproduce the effect of sensation in concrete language. This is the historical motivation for the modern English teacher's unceasing requests for more "specific details."

Faculty Psychology Campbell also exemplifies the eighteenth century faculty psychology typical of this rhetoric. In this view, the mind is compartmentalized into separate operations or faculties ("Faculty psychology" does not refer to the psychology of a university teaching staff, which would be a different field of investigation entirely). Campbell says the purpose of rhetoric is "to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will (Horner 20). Thus Campbell argues for the so-called rhetorical modes: exposition appealing to the understanding; narration, description, and poetry to the imagination; argumentation to reason; and persuasion to all of these, but especially to the emotions and will.

Later imitators of Campbell diminish persuasion to an adjunct sub-species of argument, because it is an appeal to the emotions rather than to reason, and allocate the imagination to literary studies, leaving only the understanding and the reason in the domain of rhetoric.

Current Traditional Rhetoric

These rhetorical modes are still taught in English departments under the unlikely name of "current-traditional" rhetoric. Although a number of competing rhetorics are taught, including revivals of classical rhetoric, current-traditional rhetoric still maintains a massive presence--in composition textbooks, in course descriptions, and in classrooms. In a world of spin doctors and sound bites, where entire political campaigns are run on image and emotional appeals alone, this eighteenth century rhetoric, with its emphasis on style, correctness, and concrete detail, seems incomplete, narrow, and outdated. On the other hand, Aristotle's 2,300 year old effort is still highly relevant.

Does Rhetoric Make a Difference?

A rhetoric incorporates more than practical strategies for speaking and writing. Rhetoric reflects the values and perspectives of a culture. It is a distillation of what a given society counts as knowledge and evidence, how it defines social connections and responsibilities, the context in which communicative acts will be interpreted. The rhetoric you teach or are taught makes a difference.

For example, an English teacher might say "I don't care if what they write is true or false, but give me a decent sentence." This sentiment, with its focus on style and grammatical correctness above all else, is straight out of the Campbell, Blair, Whately tradition, although none of these gentlemen would have said it so bluntly. A student taught in this way will understandably feel that grammar is more important than ideas.

However, most university faculty don't read student writing in this way. They see the errors, but read for ideas. They apply the rhetorics of their own disciplines, which are often quite different from those taught in composition classes, but leave grammar and style to the English faculty.

For the last 100 years the rhetoric we have been taught has encouraged this split between content and form, between ideas and arguments on the one hand, and style (grammar, diction, syntax) on the other. Some argue that this is the crux of our literacy problem.

In *The Rhetorical Tradition and Modern Writing* James Murphy notes that Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory* (A.D. 95) "is perhaps the most influential single book on education yet published. Quintilian's system survived the fall of the empire in many places, and his methods were employed throughout the Middle Ages. Shakespeare and Milton went to schools Quintilian would have recognized. The most distinctive feature of this curriculum is the integration of reading, listening, writing, and speaking to teach language skills.

Murphy says that "this coordinated curriculum for literacy" began to erode only in the last two generations (7), and he advocates a return to educational practices which had worked well for thousands of years.

We currently live in a time of rhetorical ferment. The hold of current-traditional rhetoric on our composition classrooms has begun to weaken, and we have found science to be a very powerful tool for answering certain questions, but inadequate for others. Shall we return to Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian? Do Kenneth Burke or Mikhail Bakhtin provide a twentieth-century solution? Do we need a rhetoric of Einstein's physics rather than Newton's? Or is a postmodern rhetoric, based on Foucault, Derrida, or Lyotard, necessary for a postmodern world?

Whatever the answer, can we afford to ignore the effects and implications of the Rhetoric we teach?