What We Are Becoming

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Published by Utah State University Press


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INFLUENCE OF ATTENTION TO STYLE AND MEMORY ON FIRST-YEAR WRITING

The emphasis on the canons of style and memory in our new Advanced Composition course has influenced how we teach first-year writing. In a recent revision to our first-year writing curriculum, we thought about ways in which we could make our students more conscious of style and its appropriateness to rhetorical occasion. This year, we are teaching two new first-year writing courses. In the first course, Analytical Reading and Writing, our goal was to overcome weaknesses in students’ abilities to negotiate the difficult reading materials that they encounter in college, given that most of their reading in secondary school came from either textbooks or literary texts. In that course, one of the ways that we help students to find efficient and effective ways to understand difficult texts is through a better understanding of syntactical patterns. Though our approach to syntax is not as complex in the first-year writing course, the ability to find the cadence of sentences and to understand the implicit meaning in various sentence structures (subordination and coordination, for example) does seem, in our early observations, to have helped them to become more mature readers—and so to suggest that the study of style may have implications for reading-based courses as well. The second course, Academic Writing, highlights features of formal academic and professional style that students need to master to communicate credibly and effectively in educational and professional contexts. Building upon their experience of reading the style of academic texts in the first course—reading academic style as a series of purposeful choices, not merely pomposity—we attempt to help students to find real maturity in their academic writing without resorting to the feigned complexity Joseph Williams has dubbed “academese” (a style that is all too familiar to teachers of first-year writing (1981). Additionally, we ask students to adapt their work to contexts in which a different style may be far more useful. To help make students aware of the need for stylistic code-switching, after students have completed a formal research paper, they are then asked to use that project as the basis for a piece of applied writing. Our students might thus adapt their work to a wiki, a basic Web site, a blog, a letter to the editor of the campus or community newspaper, a letter to a campus or government official, a brochure, or some other occasion. Part of the work that the student must do to adapt their writing to this alternative context is to specifically address stylistic
differences between the alternative context and a more traditional, formal academic or professional context.

CONCLUSION

When our students tell us that they can no longer even read a billboard or restaurant menu without thinking about its stylistic implications, we react with a measure of barely contained glee. (One student questioned, for example, a line from a newspaper: “He died of an apparent heart attack.” He went on to ask, “Can one die of an apparent heart attack? Shouldn’t it be ‘he apparently died of a heart attack’? Can a heart attack be apparent, as the adjective version suggests?”) We believe that our Advanced Composition course enables our students to become more exacting, precise writers. This precision is manifested as a result of the attention given to issues at the word, phrase, clause, and sentence level of the writing of noted essayists and authors and of students’ own writing. This attention enables students to not only recognize stylistic techniques used by other writers as well as use these techniques in their own writing, it provides them with an ability to understand and produce writing that is more complex and/or subtle in terms of its content. And though we have only begun to transfer these findings to our first-year writing program, we have already found adaptations that have benefited our students in those courses as well. In short, the study of style has the potential to raise the level of discourse and to do so in an artful way.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX
York College of Pennsylvania Professional Writing Major

Courses in the professional writing major are divided into five areas as shown below. An asterisk (*) indicates that the course is required for the major; other courses are electives. Each student must complete at least two professional writing electives.

Writing Applications Courses

- WRT 210: Writing in Professional Cultures*
- WRT 275: Playwriting
- WRT 310: Creative Writing
- WRT 315: Advanced Composition*
- WRT 320: Writing for the Web*
- WRT 371: Advanced Creative Writing
- WRT 373: Advanced Nonfiction
- WRT 374: Writing Children’s Literature
- WRT 380: Freelance Writing for the Marketplace
- WRT 410: Professional Editing*
- WRT 360–370; WRT 460–69: Special Topics in Professional and Creative Writing (e.g., Nature Writing, Medical Writing, The Personal Essay, Document Design)

Language History and Theory Courses

- WRT 225: Interdisciplinary Writing*
- WRT 290: Teaching and Tutoring of Writing
- WRT 305: Rhetorical Theory*
- LIT 310: Language and Linguistics*

Capstone Courses

- WRT 450: Experiential Learning* (i.e., an internship)
WRT 480: Senior Seminar in Professional Writing*

Students may complete a second internship, WRT 451, to fulfill one of the professional writing elective requirements.

Minor

In addition to the above required courses and professional writing electives, students are required to complete a minor as part of the professional writing major.

English and Humanities Departmental Electives

Finally, students must complete four English and humanities departmental electives.
It’s an exciting time to be a rhetoric and writing specialist. (As we write this, we realize it’s always exciting to be a rhetoric and writing specialist, but these days, it seems particularly so.) Our job markets are strong, our graduate programs are thriving, and there’s a growing movement in writing programs across the country to develop undergraduate majors in rhetoric and writing. This third development is particularly exciting—and important—because it represents a milestone in our field’s development. We finally have a place in the undergraduate catalog, on the department Web site, a prominent place that puts us on equal footing with other disciplines. We’re no longer just a set of service courses, or a vague concentration within a literature degree, or an exotic-sounding emphasis in a PhD program. We’re a degree—just like physics, just like business, just like literature (better than literature, actually).

But as we stake our claim and secure our place in the curriculum, we need to be careful. We need to build undergraduate degree programs that will last, degree programs that will grow and evolve as the years go by and not fade away as the times and academic fashions change. We need to be careful, then, here at the start, careful as we lay the foundations for what will hopefully become a long line of noteworthy programs. We need to find a focus for our programs, one that will provide us with an ever-evolving, dynamic set of concerns that will motivate, animate, and invigorate our work for years to come.

That focus is civic rhetoric.

That answer, despite its sermonic crescendo on the page, is nothing new. We all seem to agree, at least in our journals, that training in writing and rhetoric prepares one for public life, for working together in a
democratic society to make decisions and guide the course of our collective actions. But when it comes time to make our case for undergraduate degree programs, to convince our colleagues in our departments, our administrators in their distant offices, and, most importantly, our students in our classrooms and online in our program descriptions, we lose our nerve. Instead of embracing our pivotal role in civic education and “reclaiming our birthright,” as Gerard Hauser eloquently puts it, we fall back on old and tired lines of persuasion, linking the value of our programs to preparation for academic or professional success (2004, 52).

That is a mistake. And in this chapter, we argue that these justifications may have negative long-term consequences for our programs, consequences that will severely hamper our efforts to establish undergraduate majors in rhetoric and writing and reinvigorate the study of rhetoric for the twenty-first century.

THE CASE FOR CIVIC RHETORIC

The case for undergraduate degree programs in general, and civic rhetoric in particular, was first made in the late 1990s, in the pages of *College English*. There, David Fleming argued that rhetoric had indeed made quite a comeback. After centuries of marginalization, the word “rhetoric” was enjoying “considerable intellectual prestige” in the academy, appearing in journals and books all across the humanities. According to Fleming, rhetoric had been transformed “from a pejorative to an honorific term” (1998, 169). Rhetoric’s recent ascent was most notable in North American English departments, where “rhetoric is featured prominently at the two extremes of higher education,” Fleming wrote. “At one end, a fifteen-week course on writing for incoming freshman; at the other, a multi-year program of advanced study for PhD students. Between the two, there is little or nothing” (173).

This gaping hole in the curriculum worried Fleming and raised doubts about the true state of rhetoric’s revival in the modern university. “A better test for the revival of rhetoric in English departments would be the flourishing of an undergraduate major,” he wrote. “In the past, this is what rhetoric was: three to four years of intense study and practice, sometime between the ages of (about) fifteen and twenty, organized to develop the discursive competencies and sensibilities needed for effective and responsible participation in public life” (173; emphasis in original).

Rhetoric education as training for public life was key to Fleming. His proposed curriculum for a “contemporary rhetoric education”
included theory, practice, and inquiry, all with the goal of forming “the good rhetor, the person who has mastered the ‘knowledge’ of speaking and writing well, and who is conceived first and foremost as a free and equal member of a self-governing community.” This curriculum would be in line with rhetoric’s deepest roots, Fleming wrote, noting that the word “rhetoric,” in its earliest usage, denoted “the art of the public or political [i.e., civic] speaker” (184). To revitalize rhetorical education, Fleming concluded, “we need to recapture this focus on the language user as citizen” (184). We need to make civic rhetoric the focus of our undergraduate majors.

Five years later, at a conference of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies (ARS) in Evanston, Illinois, rhetoricians from both communications and English departments resoundingly embraced this emphasis on civic rhetoric. The working group tasked with discussing the teaching of rhetoric urged the alliance to issue a manifesto, one that would call for “recovering the value of rhetoric education as central to civic education” (Hauser 2004, 39). As reported by Gerard Hauser, “the relationship between civic education and rhetoric instruction was a leitmotiv” of the working group’s discussions (40). The working group acknowledged a long-standing tension in rhetoric studies between the classical Athenian ideal of “capacitating” students for active and engaged citizenship and the nineteenth-century German research institute ideal of orderly and disciplined research and, as a secondary concern, professional education. While Athens stressed paideia and the education of the whole person for civic life, Berlin stressed the discovery of new knowledge and the training of students to conduct research on their own. Hauser noted: “One might construct this as the story of rhetoric education in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America, in which rhetoric has commitments to two models of what the ideal education ought to be: commitments to Athens and to Berlin” (40).

In order to secure a place for themselves in the modern research university, rhetoricians chose Berlin. “Rhetoricians are aware that Rhetoric Studies presents itself as a scholarly discipline through its critical and theoretical work as that enterprise is understood in the German model of the research university,” Hauser wrote. But subordinating Athens to Berlin came at a price. “When Athenian commitments to paideia are subordinated or even cleansed from rhetoric, its centrality to society’s ongoing negotiation over how we shall act and interact—to politics—is either lost or ignored” (41).
Rhetoric’s loss of a role in public life motivated the working group to call for a manifesto. “To recover the value of rhetoric education as central to civic education we must reassert the role of rhetoric in our lives as citizens and social actors,” Hauser wrote. “We must reassert the importance of capacitating students by focusing on their powers of performance (dunamis) rather than focusing exclusively on their service to discovering knowledge. Rhetoric Studies may be the best, and quite possibly the only place from which this assertion may be voiced” (2004, 41–42). The working group argued that rhetoric plays a central role in guiding and governing society. Drawing on Isocrates, the group argued that rhetoric “offered humans the possibility of living in a community whereby they might distinguish themselves from animals and one another.” Furthermore, they argued that what we teach as rhetoricians “contributes to an engaged and informed citizenry and to the quality of public decision-making” (42–43).

Ultimately, the working group concluded that teachers of rhetoric must reclaim rhetoric’s role in civic education. Rhetoricians must not only participate in political discourse but also in “the education of young minds” to prepare them for active and involved citizenship:

Free societies require rhetorically competent citizens. Without rhetorical competence, citizens are disabled in the public arenas of citizen exchange—the marketplace, the representative assembly, the court, and public institutions—and democracy turns into a ruse disguising the reality of oligarchic power. Capacitating students to be competent citizens is our birthright. It has been ours since antiquity. Modern education has stripped us of it. We need to reclaim it. (52)

And reclaim it we did. Sort of. If not in our programs, then at least in our journals.

RECLAIMING OUR BIRTHRIGHT—SORT OF

The ARS’s call did not go unheeded, and it did echo in our journals, at least to a certain extent. Brian Jackson summarized the call’s resonance in the introduction to a 2007 article in Rhetoric Society Quarterly, part of that journal’s Rhetorical Paths in English and Communication Studies series. Jackson cited Hauser’s contribution to the discussion, as well as contributions from others like Steven Mailloux and Thomas Miller and wrote, “With the success of the ARS Conference and the construction
of these pathways across disciplines, it may seem that rhetoric education for civic engagement is almost certain to follow, for it is the very sort of mission that the Rhetoric Society of America itself was founded to advance” (182).

Jackson then sketched an outline of what rhetoric education for civic engagement might look like, again drawing upon a wide number of writers. Drawing on Hauser, he argued that rhetoric education “must attend to endowing students with a capacity to speak and write in multiple situations and ‘risk the unpredictable outcomes of public expression,’ rather than deposit in their minds the content of a discipline.” Drawing on Anthony Fleury, Martin Medhurst, and Kathleen Turner, he argued that developing a “capacity” for public and civic engagement “is not simply a biography of the discipline,” not simply “a compendium of key terms, a body of works starting with a Greek figure, and/or a reading list of theorists who use the word.” It is, rather, a “training of a capacity in the students that can be, and according to this model of education, ought to be used in public life” (2007, 184–85; emphasis in original).

As Jackson saw it, there was a “growing consensus in the field” that the focus of rhetoric education should be on civic rhetoric. To prove his point, he looked beyond the scholarship already mentioned and reeled off another list of writers who shared his commitment. Carol Jablonski argues, he wrote, that rhetoric education’s goal is “to encourage ‘shared, practical wisdom’ and ‘critical reflexivity’ for ‘situated’ and ‘transactional’ public advocacy.” Raymie McKerrow suggests that rhetoric education “creates a deliberative community ‘of engaged, rhetorically conscious, and consciously rhetorical, citizens.’” And Kathleen Turner says rhetoric education’s “mission is ‘to educate citizens for an active and productive life of participation in the polis’” (2007, 185).

Jackson’s purpose in his article was to make a case for rhetorical performance and analysis classes in the undergraduate curriculum. After surveying the general agreement in the field on the goals of rhetoric education, he argued that such courses would help us reclaim our birthright. “If we can develop a stronger undergraduate rhetoric education, with courses in performance and critical analysis that capture the political-ethical vision that is the heritage of civic rhetoric,” he argued in the conclusion, “we will increase the likelihood that students of rhetoric will leave the university ready to practice the rhetoric of making a difference” (2007, 199).

Not all writers, however, picked up on the ARS’s call to reclaim rhetoric’s place in civic education, to make civic rhetoric the focus of our
undergraduate majors in rhetoric and writing. Instead, many writers argued for the value of majors in terms of more practical concerns, in terms of what they would do for our profession and the institutions we work in, and in terms of what they would do for our students’ professional aspirations.

Rebecca Moore Howard, writing in a 2007 special issue of Composition Studies devoted to the undergraduate major in rhetoric and writing, argued that writing majors have the potential to do a world of good, and not just for the job security of rhetoricians. “The process of establishing a writing major can challenge the traditional normative vision of writing instruction and offer in its stead a representation of writing as a discipline and its instruction as part of the intellectual work of the institution,” she argued. Writing majors can function as “an instrument of institutional activism” and change the perception of our colleagues across the university. Writing majors help us to be seen as an “intellectual discipline,” not just “a means of inflicting discipline upon the bodies of students” (42–43). In addition, she wrote, undergraduate degree programs offer us a number of other opportunities:

At every institution there is an array of opportunities for the writing program to use its major to deliberately advance a rhetorically sophisticated vision of writing, student writers, and writing instruction. Those opportunities are a benefit of establishing a writing major, and seizing them will benefit not only the major but FYC, too, which will more readily be seen as part of an open-ended course of instruction rather than as a dumping-ground for the grammatically challenged. (2007, 49).

Dominic Delli Carpini, writing in the same special issue, argued that writing majors have the potential “to influence the disciplines with which we share institutional homes and to introduce students to areas of research that, until recently, were reserved for graduate studies” (2007, 15). The Writing Major at York College, where Delli Carpini works, was originally conceived as a pre-professional program, but after only four years, it “has begun to assert itself as a site of humanistic inquiry as well as a site of career development.” The success of the writing major within a broader Department of English and Humanities at York elicited mixed reactions from colleagues. Delli Carpini wrote that while many faculty colleagues “acknowledge that the ‘career focus’ of the writing major was a positive draw,” many of them felt ambivalent about it. One English colleague worried about the writing major’s effect on literary studies enrollments in
particular, while another said, “I’m a little worried, in general, about the erosion of literary studies programs by the far more marketable and ‘useful’ field of professional writing.” This colleague went on to say, however, that the “PW program seems much fresher and better organized and more theoretically sophisticated than the Literary Studies major” (2007, 17).

Despite these mixed reactions, the writing major had a positive influence on teaching and learning in the department. Delli Carpini wrote that one faculty colleague in philosophy acknowledged that, thanks to the writing major, philosophy students “probably pay more attention to rhetorical issues, especially when studying popular culture, film, and advertising.” Another philosophy colleague noted, “Students appear more capable of reading primary religious texts and separating style from content as well as demonstrating the ability to see how style informs content.” In addition, students now “recognize how important writing is in the workplace and how it is exactly those skills that the study of the liberal arts can develop” (2007, 24).

Students also found that the lessons learned in the writing major were useful in their other classes as well. Delli Carpini wrote that students in his early modern literature class used rhetorical concepts and theories to write about Shakespeare and Milton, while others applied their knowledge of rhetorical theory to better understand the philosophical works of Derrida, Locke, and Descartes. All of this was made possible by the return of rhetoric to the undergraduate curriculum, Delli Carpini concluded, “both through specific courses and through faculty and majors whose research interests lie there” (2007, 25).

Delli Carpini’s article was full of good news about the writing major and its positive contributions to the academic and professional lives of our students. But hidden among all the good news was something more worrisome. As almost an aside, Delli Carpini began his article with a quick discussion of how we describe our undergraduate degree programs to colleagues and potential students. He surveyed the public presentations of rhetoric and writing programs on university Web sites and found that they tend to fall into one of three categories. They feature a practical focus, a liberal arts focus, or a hybrid of the two. Delli Carpini argued that while many writing majors start out with a practical or professional focus, they have the potential, mostly driven by student interest, to eventually include a liberal arts focus as they grow, the potential, in short, to include our “back story” and our “shoptalk”—“the scholarly and theoretical bases of our discipline” (2007, 15).
Notice, however, what these programs did not feature. They did not feature a focus on civic rhetoric. In fact, they didn’t even mention civic rhetoric.

Take, for example, the programs Delli Carpini classified as having a practical focus. Millikin University’s writing major, according to its website, “emphasizes experiences in a variety of writing contexts including journalism, professional writing, academic writing, literary writing, editing, publishing, and personal creativity. By learning to shift between these multiple contexts, Millikin’s writing majors are prepared for a wide range of professional and lifelong writing, editing and publishing opportunities” (Millikin University English Department). And the University of Florida’s advanced writing track tells potential students that in “our current information-rich economy, an unprecedented demand now exists for college graduates with excellent communication skills. The Advanced Writing Model [track] provides students with extensive preparation for the variety of writing tasks required of professionals in business, law, government, and administration, as well as of graduate students and educators in all disciplines” (University of Florida English Department).

The programs with a liberal arts or hybrid focus didn’t focus on civic rhetoric either. Indiana Wesleyan University, for example, emphasized how their program “is designed to prepare students to become outstanding communicators with a high level of proficiency in the use of the written word. The major stresses both the artistic joy of composition and the practical application of writing skills to communication problems in everyday life” (Indiana Wesleyan University Modern Language, Literature, and Communication Department). And York College’s proudly hybrid program, which, Delli Carpini wrote, explicitly keeps “one foot in each world, showing how the liberal arts and practical focuses can co-exist,” (2007, 16) advertised itself this way:

A major in Professional Writing provides an education firmly grounded in the liberal arts, while preparing students for a wide range of careers as writers or communications specialists in fields such as publishing, government and non-governmental organization (NGOs), corporate communications, information technology, social service organizations, healthcare, finance, and the arts. A Professional Writing major is also excellent preparation for students who wish to pursue law school or graduate work in professional or technical writing, creative writing, rhetoric and composition, media studies, communication, and other fields. (York College of Pennsylvania English and Humanities Department)