Writing pedagogy: Pluralism required, but rhetoric rules

Roslyn Petelin
University of Queensland
r.petelin@uq.edu.au

Dr Roslyn Petelin teaches writing in the School of English, Media Studies, and Art History at the University of Queensland, where she convenes the postgraduate Program in Writing, Editing, & Publishing. She has also taught professional writing in the School of Communication within the Faculty of Business at the Queensland University of Technology and at Cornell University, New York. She has edited the Australian Journal of Communication since 1988, is a past President and Honorary Life Member of the Australian & New Zealand Communication Association, and has co-authored two books, *The Professional Writing Guide: Writing* (Allen & Unwin, with Marsha Durham) and *Professional Communication: Principles and Applications* (Pearson Education, with Peter Putnis). She is on the Editorial Advisory Boards of several US and UK journals. She has consulted extensively and run workshops on writing and information design to government and public and private sector organisations in Australia, the UK, and SE Asia.

Abstract

This paper surveys recent scholarship in composition studies and, while acknowledging its intellectual pluralism and theoretical debts to a wide range of disciplines, advocates that contemporary rhetorical theory should serve as an overarching theory and practical base of composition studies.

Keywords

composition studies, writing, rhetoric, pluralism

Introduction

Writing comprises a complex set of social processes and practices that functions at the centre of “textual culture”, a term that encompasses the material processes and ideological formations surrounding the production, transmission, reception, and regulation of texts.

Within the structures of most English departments, writing activities usually take place in three arenas: literary studies, composition studies, and creative writing studies. The first English composition requirement was initiated at Harvard University in 1873, only 23 years after Oxford University had appointed its first Professor of English Literature in 1850.
Creative writing has been a relatively recent phenomenon, taking its place in the academy during the past several decades. In this paper, I will discuss the writing pedagogy that I advocate for composition studies.

Although institutional history has kept them more or less separate, composition studies regards literary studies (which has been historically associated with prestige) as a mutually enriching field of enquiry and activity. The regard has not been mutual; composition has often been stigmatised, being relegated to a “service” or “remedial” role. Hillis Miller (1994, p. 234) speaks of “the utter contempt that many within traditional English department power structures feel for ‘composition’”. Connors (1990) uses terms such as “academic sweatshop” and “odious task”. Gere (1993, p. 2) describes composition teachers as being “scorned by their literary colleagues”. Clifford (1991, p. 39) notes that “composition is usually the minor term in the literature-rhetoric polarity, disparaged as utilitarian, marginalized as an editorial service to other departments”.

Russell (1988, p. 132) vividly describes the low status of composition in North American English departments:

> Though English departments were founded at the close of the nineteenth century largely to teach writing, and freshman composition has been the most constant part of a shifting elective curriculum ever since, composition courses have rarely been a full part of the university. Dismissed as remedial or preparatory, condemned as ineffective, passed down like old clothes to junior faculty, graduate students, or part-timers, the courses have generally remained on the periphery of the institution, a necessary evil to many administrators (and students), and an unavoidable nuisance to English departments who depended on them for enrollments.

Status aside, the intellectual fabric of the interdisciplinary field of Composition is inarguably rich, comprising threads from a wide range of disciplines: Anthropology, Rhetoric, Cultural Studies (including Cultural Geography), Critical Theory, Educational theories, Ethnography, Gender and Race Studies, History, Information and Technology theories, Literacy Studies, Literary Theory, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Psychology (Behavioural, Educational, Developmental, Cognitive), Phenomenology, and Linguistics (Text and Psycho -), and Sociology. Owens (1993) calls it a “tentacular” discipline. Foster (1988) argues that “composition is more than rhetoric’s grandchild or literary study’s half-wit sibling . . . [it] is not a single entity with a distinct focus, methodology, or theoretical base; rather it is a collection of perspectives and methodologies arising from vastly diverse sources”.

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The eclectic and syncretic aspects of composition studies, its intellectual pluralism, derive from influential theorists such as Althusser (conception of ideology), Bakhtin (dialogic or “relational thinking”), Bordieu (habitus), Deleuze (rhizome), Derrida (deconstruction), Foucault (the relation of discursive formations to power), Freire (pedagogy of “critical consciousness”), Habermas (academic discourse, autonomy, and justice), Lacan (language as “subjective perception”), Ong (orality and literacy), Polanyi (“personal knowledge”), and Vygotsky (theories of learning).

What is the place of writing in a university education and in the professions? Rhetorically effective writing is fundamental to success in academe and industry. It is at the heart of disciplinary thinking and at the heart of the new economy (Brandt, 2005), an economy that is service-oriented and in which writing is ubiquitous, global, and lifelong. The escalating demand for courses in writing, editing, and publishing and the growth of these programs can be linked to emerging industry priorities in the face of the accelerating juggernaut of the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies. In the 21st century, people are writing as never before—in print and online. As Stephen Page, President of the UK Publishers Association stated on World Book Day in 2007, “In a world awash with unedited work, edited material will have a higher currency than ever”. Demands for rhetorically competent writing and editing are increasing exponentially as industry, the academy, and the professions critically rely on greater and greater levels of verbal sophistication.

Writing cannot be reduced to inflexible formats, mechanical formulas, and unsubstantiated folklore; it is, instead, affected by a wide and complex range of variables. Functional expertise in mechanical correctness and in grammar and syntax are the hallmarks of advanced literate competence, not just basic skills. People outside the discipline often subscribe to the “window–pane” theory of language: they see language as a transparent medium that conveys factual information (Miller, 1989), but, as Raymond Williams argues: “Language . . . is not a medium; it is a constitutive element of material social practice . . . meaning is always produced; it is never simply expressed” (1977, pp. 165-166).

**Academic writing in a disciplinary context**

Faigley and Hansen (1985) point out the “need to know how that discipline creates and transmits knowledge” (p. 148). Students need to know how knowledge becomes accepted in different disciplines. Furthermore, says Bartholomae (1985), once they have acquired this understanding, they must invoke it each time they write:
Every time a student sits down to write for us, [the student] has to invent the university for the occasion—-invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community . . . to write, for example, as a literary critic one day and as an experimental psychologist the next . . . . (pp. 134 -135)

We need to intensify our efforts to help students think rhetorically, to train them to respect the relationships among writers and readers and content and purpose and exigence and contexts (historical and cultural) to enable them to enter the “Burkean parlour”. To acculturate them, we need to encourage them to attend to texts, to critically engage with texts that intellectually stretch them via “close” and “critical” reading.

Following Vygotsky, we need to embed learning into activity because learning and doing are inseparable. We need to give students habitual, immersive, scaffolded practice in writing so that they can tacitly absorb relevant jargon, acquire generic knowledge, and emulate experts, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy and leading to a more “instinctive” expertise. Each step should be visible, learnable, and achievable. As teachers of writing, we need to make the tacit explicit.

Certain key writing researchers and theorists advocate using rhetoric as the informing or capstone discipline for the study of writing as an academic field (Gere, 1993, p. 2; North, 1987, p. 33). Conscious of the centrality of rhetoric in writing, but recognising the usefulness of concepts from other disciplines such as Anthropology, Sociology, Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, and Literary Theory, many writing theorists appreciate the need for an interdisciplinary approach to contemporary writing theory and research (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1983, p. 22). This is accompanied by a recognition of the impossibility of an all-inclusive theory of writing (Parker & Campbell, 1993, p. 304). I would argue, however, that Rhetoric should provide the underlying theoretical and practical base.

**Rhetoric as an informing discipline for composition studies**

Rhetoric—the Greek word “rhetor” is derived from the same root as the Latin word “orator”—-was the core of ancient Greek and Roman education and culture. Classical rhetoric did not start out as an *a priori* science. Its founder, Aristotle, observed, analysed, and codified
citizens’ courtroom use of language when attempting to recover their stolen land, so that their intuitive practices could be used to guide others facing the same legal process. Rhetoric was also observed at work in political and ceremonial speeches and later expanded to take in sermons and letters. Ong (1971, p. 109) notes that, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, rhetoric was “diverted, . . . definitively, if not totally, from oral performance to writing”. Eventually, its scope encompassed all forms of symbolic language, including words (both spoken and written) and images.

Aristotle characterised the aim of rhetoric as “not so much to persuade, as the faculty of discovering in the particular case the available means of persuasion” (p. 1355b). Lunsford and Ede (1984, p. 91) describe Aristotelian rhetoric as being “an interactive means of discovering meaning through language”.

O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, and Fiske (1989) suggest that “if rhetoric didn't already exist it would no doubt have to be invented, since so many forms of cultural production are themselves highly rhetorical. Publicity, advertising, newspapers, television, academic books, government statements, and so on, all exploit rhetorical figures to tempt us to see things their way “ (p. 200). Ong (1971, p. 40) writes about the “universal and obsessive interest in rhetoric . . . of its vast and intricate terminology for classifying hundreds of figures of speech in Greek and Latin”.

O’Sullivan et al. (1989) define rhetoric as “the practice of using language to persuade or influence others and the language that results from this practice” (p. 200). They argue that rhetoric offers a well-established and elaborate set of terms and classifications that readers can use to see how meaning is made by identifying and “unpicking” the devices and strategies that operate in texts (p. 200). Rhetoric can be used critically to analyse messages and creatively to gain greater effectiveness in one's expression, thereby providing a complete system for generating and analysing discourse. When Durand (1983) examined several thousand French advertisements in the 1960s, he found that all the advertisements were based on the figures of speech identified in classical rhetoric.

In discussing rhetoric, Barthes (1988) describes rhetoric as openly offering itself “as a classification—of materials, of rules, of parts, of genres, of styles” (p. 48). After the three appeals of classical rhetoric (ethos, pathos, and logos) came five canons or stages of the composition of a speech. These canons were devised by Cicero, and are still used for oral presentations; all but one—memory—are applicable to written communication.

- Invention (discovery of the content of a discourse)
• Arrangement (structure of the content of the discourse)
• Style (the language, syntax, and rhythm of the discourse)
• Memory (the skill of memorising a discourse/oral presentation)
• Delivery (the presentation/the design of a discourse)

Contemporary rhetoric
Rhetoric has unfortunately suffered from “bad press” throughout much of its long history. This pejorative sense of rhetoric reflects Plato's concern that the Sophists bent the truth in their quest for effective persuasion. There is no denying that, throughout history, unscrupulous politicians have taken advantage of the negative potential of rhetoric. A piece of graffiti on a wall in Ancient Rome is rumoured to have said: “Those who do not practise rhetoric will be the victim of it”.

In the latter part of the 20th century, however, rhetoric overcame its ambiguous associations and become respectable—in scholarly circles at least. Rhetoric scholars Bizzell and Herzberg (1990) make the following claim:

At the beginning of the twentieth century, rhetoric appeared to be in decline. As an academic discipline, rhetoric no longer occupied a permanent place in the university. . . But in the course of the twentieth century rhetoric has become, once again, a valuable interdisciplinary theory of language and meaning. Throughout the century, philosophers and literary critics have rediscovered rhetoric—or reinvented it under some other rubric such as discourse or dialogism—as a solution to problems raised by traditional theories of meaning. Rhetoric has been enriched by their efforts. It has grown to encompass a theory of language as a form of social behavior, of intention and interpretation as the determinants of meaning, in the way that knowledge is created by argument, and in the way that ideology and power are extended through discourse. In short, rhetoric has become a comprehensive theory of language as effective discourse. (p. 899)

Bizzell and Herzberg's comments are echoed by Simons (1990), who, in discussing what is known as the “rhetoric of inquiry”—the movement to reconstitute the human sciences in rhetorical terms—states that:

Increasingly, scholars in a wide variety of disciplines are recasting what they are about in rhetorical terms; examining ancient rhetorical treatises for help in addressing
contemporary problems; and alleging that what for so long were considered issues in philosophy or science might more profitably be addressed as issues in rhetoric (p. 1).

The rhetorical tradition serves as an invention resource, a storehouse of codified ways of seeing, thinking, and communicating that may be tested for their goodness of fit to the matter at hand. (p. 5)

The consensus seems to be that “there is no escape from rhetoric” (Simons, 1990, p. x), with Barthes (1988) describing the world as being “incredibly full of old Rhetoric” (p. 11).

Defining rhetoric as a metalanguage, he lists several practices encompassed by contemporary rhetoric:

1) A technique. That is, an “art” in the classical sense of the word—the art of persuasion.
2) A teaching. According to Barthes, rhetoric formed the essential matter of what would today be called higher education.
3) A science. A classification of “rhetorical” figures, such as those identified by Durand and his colleagues.
4) An ethic. A code, a body of ethical prescriptions whose role is to supervise the “deviations” of emotive language.
5) A social practice. Rhetoric is that privileged technique (since one must pay in order to acquire it) which permits the ruling classes to gain ownership of speech. (Barthes, pp. 13-14).

Rhetoric as epistemic

As pointed out by Aristotle, the purpose of rhetoric is not simply to persuade, but to “discover” knowledge in a cooperative dialectic between writer and reader. A central issue for philosophers and rhetoricians since Plato and Aristotle is how written and oral discourse contribute to what people believe they know (how rhetoric may be “epistemic”). Theorists are increasingly acknowledging rhetoric’s role in constructing rather than merely transmitting knowledge in discourses as diverse as theoretical physics, economics, literary criticism, and psychoanalysis (Simons, 1990, p. xi). Writing about the basis of economics, McCloskey calls statistics “figures of speech in numerical dress” (1984, p. 98).

The influence of literary theory: Abrams's taxonomy

The literary critic Abrams (1953) proposed four theories that provide an analytic scheme to apply to texts. These theories have been very influential in literary criticism for the past forty years, and have been adopted and adapted by composition theorists. Abrams labels his
theories the mimetic, the pragmatic (rhetorical), the expressive, and the formalist. Abrams's starting point is the rhetorical triangle, in which the writer, the reader, and “reality” form the points of a triangle that encloses the text. Abrams states (p. 6) that, “although any reasonably adequate theory takes some account of all four elements, almost all theories . . . exhibit a discernible orientation toward one only” : mimetic/reality; rhetorical/reader; expressive/writer; and formalist/text.

Mimetic theories, which held sway from the time of Aristotle (fifth century BCE) to the end of the eighteenth century, and still have currency, can be used to analyse texts that are intended to present information that accurately reflects some aspect of the world, a universe that comprises a preexisting and knowable reality that can be imitated. Mimetic theories are problematic for many contemporary language theorists, because they subscribe to a discredited “windowpane theory of language” mentioned earlier, which is based on the belief that language is transparent, that “language provides a view out onto the real world” (Miller, 1979, pp. 611 -612), that language represents a knowable reality, when, in fact, people know the world only through using language to “define, organize, and generalize from their limited sense-perceptions and other language” (Dowst, 1980, p. 71).

Pragmatic or rhetorical theories can be used to address those documents that aim to influence readers: documents that are a means to an end. This perspective originated in the theory of classical rhetoric. Pragmatic or rhetorical theories highlight the effectiveness and persuasiveness of documents for readers. Many contemporary writing scholars believe that all language is inherently rhetorical —that there's no such thing as a rhetorically neutral text (Lunsford & Connors, p. 390). So, rhetorical theories can be used to evaluate the persuasiveness/effectiveness of a document for a reader.

Expressive theories displaced for a time the mimetic and pragmatic/rhetorical theories that had held sway from Aristotle's time up until the end of the eighteenth century. Expressive theorists believe that knowledge lies within individuals; they regard “truth” as being in the personal experience of the writer. Expressive theorists, who value originality, sincerity, and an “authentic” voice, came to prominence during the Romantic movement in English poetry around 1800. For the expressive theorists, writing is a means of self-expression of one's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. The Romantic view regards writing inspiration as mysteriously bestowed by a muse on writers, who are regarded as natural geniuses. These theories still hold strong sway in creative writing circles.
Formalist theories value mechanical correctness, structure, and unity within a document. The text is an autonomous artifact, a self-sufficient entity constituted by its parts and their relations with one another. A formalist critic sets out to judge a text solely on criteria intrinsic to its own genre. Formalist theories have been subscribed to since Aristotle formulated formalist theory in his Poetics. The “New Critics”, a school that held sway in literary circles from the late 1930s to the 1960s, and of which there are still vestiges, were enthusiastic exponents of formalist theories. Formalist theories are very much out of favour in contemporary composition theory, but are enormously influential in professional circles because they insist upon unified, mechanically perfect documents.

**Fulkerson's metatheory of the teaching of writing**

Fulkerson (1990, 2005) takes Abrams's taxonomy of theories for analysing writing and proposes a “metatheory” for the teaching of writing. He argues that a “theory of composition” would include four components: an aim (an axiology), a process (a procedural component), a means of teaching (a pedagogy), and an agreement about what counts as knowledge (an epistemology).

Fulkerson argues that these four elements are both necessary and sufficient for a theory of writing. He believes, in other words, that these four and only these four are required to teach writing. He maintains that there is a significant consensus on a rhetorical axiology, but differing beliefs about process, pedagogy, and epistemology.

Those who subscribe to a rhetorical axiology characterise “good” writing as writing that communicates effectively with its intended readers, shaping itself to the demands of a particular audience. It is a way of getting things done within a discourse community. Fulkerson points out that, “related to the concern for the reader is the problematic but productive idea of writing as inherently social” (1990, p. 416). “Writing is by nature socially mediated (through shared cultural assumptions, the use of cultural allusions, intertextual citations, etc.)” (1990, p. 419). Kytle (1969) explains social context in this way:

> Because we live in a particular country, in a particular part of the world, in a particular age; because we were raised in a particular class and educated in a particular educational system by teachers who were also the product of their culture, we possess a large collection of attitudes and values . . . (p. 49)
Social constructionist theories of writing

The central assumption of this social view, which derives from Sociology, is that human language can be understood only from the perspective of a social group such as Kytle describes, not from the perspective of a single individual. The basis of this social view is that knowledge is created through the interaction of individuals in their material and social circumstances. Any effort to write about the self or reality always comes in relation to previous texts, relying on the concept of intertextuality: “‘Words carry with them the places where they’ve been’ (Bakhtin quoted in Faigley, 1986, p. 535). Those theorists who regard writing as a social act within a discourse community (which shapes the writer as much as it is shaped by the writer), the social constructionists, along with the epistemic rhetoricians, hold that language constitutes, rather than reflects, reality. They believe that “we use language primarily to join communities we do not yet belong to and to cement our membership in communities we already belong to” (Bruffee, p. 784). Bazerman and Paradis (1991) describe writing as “more than socially embedded: it is socially constructive. Writing structures our relations with others and organizes our perceptions of the world” (p. 3).

Cognitive theories of writing

Another set of writing theories to emerge under the rhetorical banner arose from Cognitive Psychology. Cognitive theories of writing examine the individual writer's composing processes— the thinking, remembering, inventing, and developing of ideas that writers do. Cognitive psychology researchers examine strategies that writers use and rhetorical choices they make at word, sentence, and document level as they compose. Cognitive process theorists work on the assumption that writing is primarily an individual act, that a writer's language originates within the inner reaches of the individual mind.

Researchers analyse writers' goals by retrospectively interviewing writers after they've done some composing or by setting up think-aloud protocols—in which writers are encouraged to think aloud as they compose and their thoughts are captured by a tape recorder and turned into transcripts. These transcripts are then analysed by researchers. The goal of this research is to investigate the processes that are effective and ineffective, so that effective strategies can be taught to ineffective writers. Cognitive process theories have been very influential in American composition classrooms.

The theories of writing presented in this paper can be classified into two types: product-centred theories and process-centred theories. Product-centred theories include mimetic and formalist theories; process-centred theories include expressive, cognitive, and social constructionist theories. It is clear that contemporary rhetorical theory is a strong presence in
all theories and can be advocated to serve as an overarching theory.

References


