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Writing and “Good Reasons”

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Many of our students will not or cannot perceive the ethical consequences of their prose. They do not see that they have constructed an unrepresentative example or that they are engaging in sloganeering when they should be providing well-thought support for their viewpoint. Additionally, they often assume a stance which alienates any reader who happens to disagree with their viewpoint.

For example, last term I received an argumentative paper defending jet boat racing on a small lake in southeastern Michigan. I was impressed with the singularity of the argument. The writer merely repeated, three times, that he enjoyed watching the boats race, stated that *he* did not find the noise particularly irritating and concluded that those few people who lived on the lake who found the boats a nuisance should move elsewhere. He wrote the paper in response to a letter to the editor which argued that the jet boats should be removed from the lake before a serious accident occurred.

The weekend after I read his first draft, the local newspaper ran an article describing a fatal accident involving a jet boat on that same lake. Moreover, the article described a growing concern by many lake dwellers over the safety of the lake and the high noise levels caused by the jet boats. The newspaper article shocked me. The student had not mentioned the community concern. The following week, the student presented a “revised” version of his paper; essentially he said the same thing and in the same tone. I challenged him with the newspaper clipping of the fatal lake accident. While he admitted that he had known about the accident, he said that he still felt his paper was an appropriate response, that he liked to see the jet boats and that if people were that concerned over noise and safety, they should move elsewhere.

I have been in this situation several times as a writing instructor. Often, I have felt that the

confrontation merely confirmed student suspicions that I am narrow minded or anxious to impose my ideas on someone else. On the one hand, I want to protect the integrity of student thought; I don't want my students writing dishonestly merely to avoid confrontations with me. I don't want to turn my discussions of student work into “dictation sessions” where students merely discover what it is “I want.” The principal question, it seems to me, is how I can have students confront their own values, with me sharing my own values at times, yet still not intruding on their territory. This problem suggests another query: what topics are appropriate to talk about in discussing a student's paper. Can I talk about values and ethics without imposing my own standards on my students? Is there some “objective” starting point for a good discussion on the values implied or expressed in a student's paper? I believe Karl Wallace's essay on ethics and invention suggests a solution to this problem.

I. The Substance of Rhetoric

Much of Karl Wallace's scholarship has been devoted to rhetorical invention, ways of discovering the material for discourse. For the ancients, invention was primarily a process of recollection. Faced with creating discourse, the speaker or writer assessed the situation and then inventoried the warehouse of rhetorical topics appropriate for the occasion. The topics, or *topoi*, not only provided the source for the stock arguments, proverbs and quotations, but also suggested the analytical tools necessary for developing the lines of an argument, such as definition, comparison, analogy, cause and effect. In a similar way, the traditional journalistic news story presents the writer with a set of topics, who, what, where, when, why and how. But the limits of the contemporary journalistic topics gave birth to the “new journalism,” a rejection of the notion of “value-free” observation and reporting. Likewise the modern day communicator sees the restrictiveness of the classical topics. Whereas the inventional problem for the ancients was to recall the best available topics for persuasion, the modern communicator faces a much more complex inventional task: discovering something—anything—to say in

response to a rhetorical situation.

Wallace clearly disagrees with those rhetoricians who have given invention a “modern silence.” He chides those scholars who have persuaded a generation of students that language is devoid of meaning. This de-emphasis of language allows most people today to view rhetoric almost exclusively as a manipulative vehicle. As a result, Wallace argues that invention is rarely seen as belonging to the province of rhetoric and questions whether our current understanding of rhetoric renders it anything more than “the art of framing information and of translating it into intelligible terms for the popular audience” (p. 358). Today, as writing instructors, we must ask ourselves if rhetoric is anything more than information transfer. Breaking with many of his contemporaries, Wallace argues that substance cannot be separated from form, structure, order or arrangement; he joins other scholars concerned with invention in criticizing the dearth of attention and superficiality of treatment given invention in most speech and writing texts.

Wallace develops two ideas in his essay: “the substance of rhetoric” and the nature of “good reasons.” These ideas not only provide a sound basis for invention but also suggest an ethical starting point that teachers can use in discussing their students’ work. The substance of rhetoric, Wallace says, consists of choice-making and the words of judgement and appraisal that accompany that activity. The substance of rhetoric consists of statements, “good reasons,” which support our choice-making activity. “Choosing itself is a substantive act and the statement of a choice is a substantive statement” (p. 360). Thus enters ethics which, Wallace says, concerns itself with how we use language when we discuss choices among alternatives (p. 363). Because all information is inherently persuasive, it therefore has ethical ramifications. Two fundamental questions must be addressed: (1) What shall I do or believe? and, (2) What ought I to do? These two questions coexist with two classes of judgement: (1) judgements of *value* and *morals* (which decide questions of the good, the desirable) and (2) judgements of *obligation* (which decide ques-

tions of duty—what we ought to do). Wallace suggests his own modern topics to be used in discussing ethical concerns, presenting them as an inventional system: the desirable, the obligatory and the admirable or praiseworthy. Wallace’s trilogy attempts to address the fundamental issues raised when we communicate questions of obligation. Thus, Wallace argues that “many rhetorical topoi may be readily derived from ethical and moral material” and that “topics and lines of argument inevitably ... lead the investigator to ethical and moral considerations” (p. 367).

II. Good Reasons

Wallace defines “good reasons” as “a statement offered in support of an ought proposition or of a value-judgement” (p. 368). Good Reasons can serve as a “technical label that refers to all the materials of argument and explanation” (p. 368). The advantages of using this ethical term are many, Wallace says. Its use reminds us that “the substance of rhetorical proof has to do with values and value-judgements, i.e., with what is held to be good” (p. 368). The term also reminds us that the “process of proof is a rational one” (p. 369). Finally, the term “implies the indissoluble relationship between content and form, and keeps attention on what form is saying” (p. 369). Wallace eschews the classical modes of proof (ethos, pathos and logos) as “unreal and useless” because, as inventional devices, they point the communicator to the wrong questions. The classical modes, for example, suggest that writers consider whether to support their positions by logical, ethical or emotional means. With Wallace’s inventional system, writers ask “What is my choice? What are the supporting and explanatory statements? What information is trustworthy?”

Wallace finds his inventional system attractive and useful because of its objectivity. For example, in the argument “Pat should not have copied from Fran’s paper because that was cheating and cheating is wrong,” the “general principle,” says Wallace, is that “cheating is wrong” which “is relevant and functions as a warrant.” The principle “cheating is wrong” is “valid to the extent that it corresponds with the

beliefs and conduct of the group which gives it sanction." The objectivity of the principle rests with its independence from the speaker's personal, or subjective, attitude or belief.

III. Limits and Usefulness

Twenty years have passed since Wallace wrote this essay, "The Substance of Rhetoric: Good Reasons." I find two objections suggested. First, the classical modes of proof do not suggest topics or issues that must be addressed. If I decide to support a viewpoint with logical appeals, I must then decide what logical appeals to use. And because I have no compelling reason to use any particular logical structure (compare and contrast, definition, example), I have no sense of how much logic will be sufficient to develop my case. Second, a reliance on the classical modes as a way of seeing how discourse operates reinforces the popular view of rhetoric as a manipulative vehicle. Mechanistic models of communication, such as the Shannon-Weaver model. (Speaker Message Channel Receiver) construe the communication process as consisting of an active speaker or writer engaging or "manipulating" a passive audience. On the other hand, Wallace's invention scheme seems rich in subject matter: faced with "proving" my viewpoint, I am directed to examine the values which allow me to support the position I wish to communicate. Rather than searching for some vague external persuasive appeal, I concern myself with discovering the reasons which motivate me to argue for an ought statement.

Wallace's system also can help us analyze other people's discourse. While the classical modes may produce some interesting insights regarding particular logical, emotional or ethical appeals, Wallace's system has the potential for revealing a deeper structure of meaning not unlike the richness of Kenneth Burke's pentad. For example, in analyzing an angry letter writer's appeal for sheriff's deputies to stop harrassing river boaters for failing to wear life preservers and instead to clean up the polluted river banks, one of my students concluded that the writer seemed less concerned with pollution and more concerned with the ticket she apparently had received. Such an insight came from an

analysis of the writer's use of reasons rather than from attending to the article's mode of persuasion.

Wallace's system has one serious limit, however: his assertion that "good reasons" presents the communicator with an objective and valid set of principles upon which to build an argument. Wallace defines objective as that which is beyond the communicator's personal or subjective attitude or belief. A valid reason "corresponds with the beliefs and conduct of the group which gives it sanction." Few of us will quarrel with Wallace's principle that "cheating is wrong." We face problems, however, discerning whether a particular act is an instance of cheating; and we assume an even greater burden in proving the existence or absence of "extenuating circumstances" which might change the status of the act from cheating to, say, survival. Wallace seems to assume a rhetorical situation in which the writer's audience is unrealistically homogenous in its beliefs, including beliefs in what constitutes a "valid" and "objective" principle.

Wallace ends his essay with a call to test the hypothesis that the special province of rhetoric is the axioms which "serve as a base for finding good reasons and thus for providing fundamental materials in any given case of rhetorical discourse" (p. 370). Therefore, writers must do more than merely select objective, valid principles to persuade the audience first that the situation demands discussion of certain principles. Those principles then need to be defended as relevant before they are convincingly argued. The writer of a paper on abortion, for example, first must argue that the abortion issue requires discussion of certain values. These values then need to be identified as relevant. Why and how, for example, are the values of "a woman's right to control her own body" or "nobody but the Creator has the right to end life" relevant to the abortion issue? Finally, then, the writer must apply the specific principle, "right to control" or "right to end life" relevant to the abortion issue, trying to persuade the audience that the principle does indeed "fit" the issue. This process consists of more than mere identification and development of a thesis.

In sum, Wallace's essay challenges us to approach the argumentative paper from a values perspective. Rather than inserting our thesis into some predetermined format, problem-solution for example, Wallace challenges us to examine the reasons why we support the ought statement. Our attention moves beyond organizational schemes and persuasive modes and devices to the germ from which our perspective on a controversy developed. Wallace asks us to make the process of deciding what to say and how to say it intensely personal and specific, to engage our audience in communication which touches not only the accessible warehouse of our opinions but also the less examined room of our values and beliefs.

IV. Classroom Application

In the classroom, I conduct several activities which allow and encourage students to view the writing process from a more "complete" perspective which includes the ethical. I begin with a classroom discussion of commercial and political advertising which centers around the message's use of reasons to support a main viewpoint—to vote for Candidate X or to purchase product X. Often there are contradictions between the stated and implied reasons. For example, the ad copy may state "gets more miles per gallon than Car Y," yet the ad's visual content may scream "buy this car and you too will be sexually attractive." Some ads promise a logical and fair discussion of reasons in support of their viewpoint yet close analysis reveals a bundle of exaggerations, half-truths and contextually inaccurate statements. Ads for candidates for local offices often list names of organizations to which they belong along with educational credentials. Such ads give the appearance of being "factual" and "objective" yet ignore other important aspects of the candidate's background such as personality, motivation for the job and perception of the duties required of the elected office.

I read letters to the editor, editorials and opinion columns to the class. We discuss these articles in much the same manner as the print ads—looking for the underlying reasons which support the claims made to "prove" the viewpoint of the piece. I find letters to the editor particularly

effective because they are short, written on topical issues and usually with a great deal of passion (which makes for interesting reading!). In preparation for writing their own argumentative papers, I divide the class into small groups and have students discuss their writing topic—the viewpoint, the arguments they plan to use and the reasons in support of those arguments. Finally, I spend some brief time in class discussing ethics and writing. Each of my writing assignments asks students to consider a rhetorical situation, including audience character (hostile, indifferent, supportive), occasion and purpose. This provides students with a context within which to weigh decisions regarding argument, organization, reasons and style.

Rather than presenting ethics as a "unit" in a writing course, I attempt to demonstrate its persuasiveness in any serious attempt to write well in rhetorical situations which demand formal messages. My approach is particularly irritating and sometimes frustrating to students who can demonstrate little evidence that they have examined the beliefs, values and opinions they have carried with them from adolescence into adulthood. But I believe that it is essential that students leave my writing course as better writers and thinkers, sensitive to the ethical implications of their discourse.

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