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Training Speech Center Consultants: Moving Forward with a Backward Glance

LINDA HOBGOOD

Viewed from this perspective, rhetoric is a teaching discipline in a sense that brings more complexity and dignity to teaching than either the modern research university or the contemporary business college might allow. —Michael Leff

If a man is fortunate he will, before he dies, gather up as much as he can of his civilized heritage and transmit it to his children. And to his final breath he will be grateful for this inexhaustible legacy, knowing that it is our nourishing mother and our lasting life. —Will and Ariel Durant

The commitment to a student-staffed speech center is at least twofold: though critical space allocation decisions as well as equipment purchase and placement required for successful operation are necessary and necessarily draw attention, the same kind of concentrated and thorough reflection is needed in considerations of staff training. Peer consulting, to be effective, calls for training that is intensive and extensive, theoretical and applied, but it should also prepare student consultants to faithfully reflect the nature, scope and state of the rhetorical art. Speech center consultants are better prepared to meet a greater variety of requests for assistance if they comprehend the study of rhetoric as a scholarly discipline and the character of rhetoric that spans disciplines and extends beyond the discourse of the academy.

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Such training is not only possible but is best accomplished by incorporating a historical component in the training course, one that acquaints trainees with the heritage of the discipline and those who have contributed to it as teachers, practitioners, and philosophers. This argument cites advantages that include, but are not limited to, the potential for deeper epistemological and pedagogical understanding. When students training to become speech consultants examine rhetoric's theoretical origins and trace its modes of inquiry, they have the opportunity to regard critically and to appreciate more fully the ubiquity and nuances of rhetoric, which frequently inspires an earnest sense of responsibility to the task of consulting and a dedication to conveying to peers the gravity of a person's engagement with spoken discourse.

While acknowledging the implications and challenges of assuming a historical perspective that includes the rhetorical dilemmas, I believe the educational benefits outweigh the burdens. Among the more significant effects of a training course that features a historical overview is the development of accountability on the part of consultant trainees for the precepts they decide to uphold, the means by which they come to their understandings, and the theoretical positions they decide to privilege or represent favorably to their peers. These students become, in a sense, conscious and prudent caretakers of the knowledge they seek to share, and this effect is good for the speech center client, good for the student consultant, and good for the study of rhetoric.

Description and Analysis of the Course Component

One third of the course, the initial five weeks of a fifteen-week semester, engages enrolled students in a study of the history of the discipline of rhetoric. Readings include anthologies and synoptic histories such as those by James J. Murphy and Richard Katula, Craig R. Smith, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, Douglas Ehninger, and James A. Herrick, recent translations of the writings of scholars of antiquity, particularly George Kennedy's translation of *On Rhetoric* by Aristotle, and accounts of the teaching of rhetoric from classical times to the present, including excerpts from the writings of Quintilian, and studies by Donald Lemen Clark, and Edward P.J. Corbett.

Students work individually and in groups researching scholars and philosophers from each of five commonly recognized but arbitrarily divided time periods to acquire and attempt to assemble an understanding that is comprehensible and, for their purposes, coherent. Tracing the treatment of classical concepts considered fundamental across eras, we attempt to analyze fluctuating attitudes toward rhetoric that influenced its teaching. From the historical survey, as a class we examine pedagogy as it pertains to patterns of instruction in rhetoric and communication

over time. Texts aiding the transition from a historical survey of scholars and theory to an analysis of teaching approaches include a wide range of works, from popular to scholarly. Mortimer Adler, Fred Antczak, Tom Shachtman and Reid Buckley complement the essays presented in special issues of *Communication Education*¹ and *Southern Speech Communication Journal*.² The remaining course components include shadowing exercises, practice in consulting, and critical review of current procedures with a view toward improvement. Project proposals are presented orally and submitted in written form.

The intensity of the rhetorical component, because it is compressed to fit the first few weeks of the semester, may have a distilling effect. Five weeks is just enough to whet the intellectual appetites of those who are intrigued by the history of the discipline, and it is probably more than sufficient to provide grounding in the origins of the art to those who are primarily interested in acquiring skills necessary to develop their student consulting expertise. While one student confided at the end of the course that she had considered dropping the class when she realized we were not going to commit additional time expressly to the study of classical rhetoric, not every class member displayed such keen interest in the scholars of antiquity. Approximately equal numbers of students complained that we move too quickly through the historical component as those who considered five weeks more than ample time devoted to what is intended to be a practicum experience. Most if not all the students in each class in theory and pedagogy gained confidence with an essential vocabulary of rhetoric and seemed to appreciate knowing sources of the terms and concepts and the movements that spawned them.

Over the seventeen years I have been teaching this course, the students have seemed genuinely interested in studying the work of the Sophists from a rhetorical-theoretical vantage, then revisiting their contributions to the pedagogy of rhetoric. They have been more receptive to ideological and cultural charges brought against rhetoric, and they can grasp, with time as context, the need to understand clearly such attacks in order to determine where they themselves would stand. It helps the trainees to understand the tumult of the art and the tradition that has included an intense disdain for rhetoric. Being able to locate historically an emphasis on logic or style, perceiving the popularity of theories associated with Ramism, belles-lettres, or the elocutionary movement, and observing changing political impulses and commensurate regard for rhetoric in practice and in teaching lends dimension to each student's consulting acumen as it develops and is nurtured by an expanded awareness. They can discover, for example, Plato's way of using rhetoric to disparage it as "cooking," and they can recognize rhetorical strategies employed by leading characters in his dialogues. With such understanding, the consultants can more fully appreciate and even be inspired by Plato in what Professor Jerry Tarver calls

“one of the rare moments when he was not attacking rhetoric: “Then the conclusion is obvious, that there is nothing shameful in the mere writing of speeches. But in speaking and writing shamefully and badly, instead of as one should, that is where the shame comes in” (414).

This new awareness of rhetorical context and history can create a temptation for consultants to convey so much information that they risk overwhelming clients in their enthusiasm for certain topics. The trainees discover the need for discernment and attention to disposition. (This is especially true of newly trained consultants; the veterans on the student staff delight in tempering that enthusiasm, as they all too often see their own “past selves” in the behaviors of the fledgling class.) Conscious of audience needs and imposed time constraints, consultants learn to adapt the sharing of critical information to the climate and tenor of the appointment and to adjust to each individual or group they assist. For their part, the clients leave a speech center appointment knowing that the consultant who passed along valuable material has at least a basic knowledge of rhetoric, its background and significance according to rhetorical theories from the classical to the contemporary.

A training course that privileges rhetoric works best in the midst of a thriving and full-fledged department of rhetoric and communication studies. Theory and pedagogy with a historical component supports and is supported by course offerings and independent study opportunities in rhetoric that enable in-depth and wide-ranging research in rhetoric and philosophy, rhetoric and politics, rhetoric and culture, and rhetorical-critical approaches, if only because student speech consultants frequently wish to pursue a deeper understanding of the art they are helping to convey. With options such as interpersonal communication, speechwriting, rhetorical theory and criticism, rhetorical history, memory, and media studies, the consultants bring back to the speech center new ways of looking at artifacts and innovative ways to examine texts. As consultants, they put to use the rhetorical knowledge they bring, applying and testing almost immediately their new understanding. This kinetic opportunity embeds and preserves their understanding of rhetoric in action as the consultants learn by doing.

Students in theory and pedagogy have also discovered complementary interests across the liberal arts curriculum—in classics and in classical languages, religion and philosophy, comparative literature, education, psychology, history, and political science—where knowledge of rhetoric benefits them explicitly. Rhetorical knowledge acquired in the training course and applied across academic fields is a powerful aid to a trainee’s consulting abilities as it serves interdisciplinary aims of the speech center. When the consultants are familiar with the varied coursework that brings their peers to a practice session, the possibility for mutual understanding of the assignment increases. Even more important is what is possible when client

and consultant can communicate in the same disciplinary “language.” Faculty members tend to prove this in frequent requests for speech consultants to work with their students who “also have some knowledge of our discipline, or better yet, have taken [the] course.”

Drawbacks exist to learning history from someone other than a scholar specifically trained in its tenets and outside the history classroom in a context that is essentially rhetorical, but the effects may be more valuable than detrimental. Discussion of the lessons of history in any classroom forum reminds students of its persistent import to the pursuit of knowledge and, as with rhetoric, its inescapable quality. Questions as to the nature of rhetoric likewise invite speculation as to history’s special imprint. Possibilities for scholarly inquiry abound.

Implications

A theory and pedagogy course that whets the intellectual appetite comes at an epistemological cost. Knowledge-making can be indiscriminately sobering, a threat to students’ deeply and fondly held illusions. Learning eventually leads to self-examination, a practice simultaneously healthy and humbling. Contoured to invite such reflexivity, a speech center training course taught from a historical perspective needs to reckon with the claim that history is hardly immune from rhetorical scrutiny and vice versa. To this end, a university’s receptivity to integrative coursework that includes approaches suggested by David Zarefsky’s “four senses” can stimulate the student whose interest is focused on what happens when events and discourse are subjected to the imbricated methods of inquiry employed by history and rhetoric according to any of the four combinations Zarefsky suggests, including the history of rhetoric, the rhetoric of history, rhetorical events understood from a historical perspective, and historical events viewed from a rhetorical perspective (26-30). Some of the most stimulating class discussions arise when we consider Zarefsky’s claim: “Facts do not speak; they must be spoken for” (20).³

The opportunity to apply theory, recognition of the ongoing need to question and reflect, and the stimulation to find out more are all consequences of the training course designed to include rhetorical history. As satisfying as these outcomes may be, there are troubling effects of this model. Often, there is not sufficient time within the semester to develop competence in critiquing group discussion or interpersonal effectiveness, which has implications because of the means by which one qualifies for the practicum. While too many prerequisites would diminish the pool of qualified applicants for consulting, delay eligibility to apply to the center, and limit consultants’ years of service on the staff (and our center takes pride in the fact that one does not need to major in communication to be a student speech consultant), these factors can leave a gap in student trainees’ knowledge, a gap that needs to be filled during the training course.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of faculty who assign students to come to our speech center do so for the purpose of practice for formal prepared public discourse, rather than for reasons relating to less formal discussion. The training course thus structured supports the rhetorical bent of our center and the character and culture of the university it serves. Nevertheless, emphasis on rhetorical-historical pedagogy marginalizes (or treats inadequately) something else. Little time remains for reviewing the relationship between techniques of organization including outlining that so often make a difference to students who come to the center for help. It is perhaps irresponsible for a speech center to count on other courses to satisfy the need to teach methods of speech outlining and organization, information that is distinctively advantageous to the beginning public speaker. Focusing on rhetorical history also reduces attention to training in listening effectiveness, something essential to students preparing to consult with clients. While the course accords time for teaching listening techniques, and though the trainees have abundant opportunity to practice listening in the shadowing sessions, there has never been sufficient time for formally analyzing listening abilities in class beyond standard quizzes and homework assignments to gauge retention and assess understanding, which is a significant concern as teachers consider the inclusion of rhetorical history in the training course.

Discussion

Nevertheless, consultants trained in this way can gain a heightened sense of responsibility for conveying rhetorical precepts, precepts they understand because of the inclusion of a historical component in the training practicum. Each year, I review the historical component, and because of the background in rhetoric students gain I usually intensify this part of the course. Working in tandem, the newly trained keep the more seasoned consultants aware and accountable for the material they convey in consultations. Clients benefit from a consultation that is rhetorically grounded, and they have well-placed trust in the reliability of the information they gain in the feedback phase of the appointment. Students and consultants have a greater appreciation for the scope and potency of rhetoric, thanks in part to the history unit included in the preparation for consulting. In any number of the courses offered by the Communication department, students can expect to encounter the nature of the rhetorical art—as civic, aesthetic, rational, and revolutionary, and in theory and pedagogy, class members are likewise asked to consider these perspectives, but with the imminent prospect of sharing this knowledge as they understand it and defending it with conviction for their peers in speech center sessions, which those who teach can readily appreciate.

Finally, a course designed as described contributes to a spirit of engagement that is in keeping with the liberal arts tradition. Students continue to be perplexed

when pressed for an answer as to “what is so important about going to a liberal arts university?” Yet, one purpose of a liberal arts education is to further scholarly inquiry, which involves faculty encouraging the desire and the means for younger scholars to become part of what Adler terms the “Great Conversation.”

Rhetoric is foundational to such a conversation. Students, especially those who will serve as speech consultants, need to locate the “place” of rhetoric in the academy and in the conversation as they discover the rhetorical qualities of the conversation itself. Leff offers a compelling discussion of the role of rhetoric in education. His observations concerning “disciplinarity” (as evidenced by attendees at his 2003 NCA conference presentation titled “Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Rhetoric”) assume responsibility for rhetoric in the academy, noting the typical claims by members of both English and Communication departments that rhetoric is “their discipline.” Still, he points out:

On the other hand, a lot of people study rhetoric seriously but think of it as an interdisciplinary activity that necessarily crosses the boundaries of the various human sciences. For these scholars it may seem parochial and artificial to fix rhetoric in disciplinary accouterments. Rhetoric, after all, pertains to modes of argument and expression that apply to most if not all types of discourse, including the types produced within academic disciplines. And in a strong formulation of this perspective, rhetoric becomes more than an aspect of discursive practice—it opens a general perspective on life—a mode of being in the world, and this is not the stuff of disciplinarity but of something far more exalted. (1)

The larger context that Leff articulates for rhetoric can find purchase in a speech center, available to all and staffed by consultants trained to apply theory beyond disciplinary confines, a center that presents a genuine opportunity to offer such perspective as Leff describes. Whatever else may contribute to this, the rhetorical nature of the training course makes it possible for students and then clients to make connections to their liberal arts education by applying what they have learned in their classes.

Furthermore, asserting that rhetoric appropriately belongs to both “big” and “little” perspectives, Leff insists:

The difference between these two positions is real and substantial, but they are not mutually exclusive, and under the right circumstances their recognition might yield a productive (and thoroughly rhetorical) competitive collaboration. That is, interdisciplinary rhetoric can act as a check against disciplinary rhetoric turning into a dreary set of routines. Disciplinary rhetoric can act as a ballast

to stabilize the ethereal tendencies of big rhetoric. Neither side should try to discard or trivialize the view of the other. (2)

Student consultant training that reflects such a “both/and” appreciation for rhetoric as Leff’s quote addresses has the potential to make the consultations that occur at a speech center qualify as among the “right circumstances” Leff hopes for. A speech center may be the very setting in which an understanding of rhetoric as disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and extra-disciplinary abides. Much depends on the student consultants and the form their training takes. Leff writes:

From the Ancient Greeks to the present, there is a continuous tradition (if I may use that word) of teaching students to write, speak, argue, and express themselves. To see ourselves as part of that tradition gives us a sense of identity that persists across time and circumstance even as time and circumstances change. (5)

The training course, when it includes a component on the background of the art of rhetoric, creates a situation conducive to sharing the sense of identity to which Leff refers and regards as significant. When founded on training that seeks to help students claim that identity for themselves, consulting at the speech center enables the trained consultants to share with their peers the theories and methods they have studied, to help student clients apply that knowledge, and to assert their identity as purveyors of the art in the process.

Conclusion

Explicit attention to the history of the discipline of rhetoric strengthens any speech center training course. Benefits offset any disadvantages to this approach, and benefits extend beyond the obvious. Peer consultants whose training includes material foundational to the discipline are more likely to identify with that discipline in a manner that upholds tenets and contributes to the pursuit of excellence.

These experiences with rhetorical history are based on seventeen years of teaching the theory and pedagogy course at the same university, where circumstances have been favorable for this method. Class sizes have been manageable, permitting the numerous assignments prompted by this approach and fostering many opportunities to observe the historical component’s validity. As others consider this approach to teaching the training course, it would be helpful to compare results in the short and long term, according to various enrollments.

Motivation on the part of student clients and consultants matters, of course, but any speech center will operate more effectively where faculty and administrators treat seriously the goal of competence in public expression. The most highly trained

consultants can hardly be expected to compensate for speaking assignments that carry little grade weight, or that satisfy nothing beyond a pass-fail requirement. Such assignments will invariably produce speeches that reflect precisely the disregard for rhetoric that is implied. Though design of a speaking component is not the subject of this essay, it speaks to a relevant question. Beyond the boundaries of a communication department, whose concern does a cross-curricular appreciation for excellence in public expression become?

The impetus for raising the level of expectation for students' spoken discourse may be most persuasively generated by those with greatest concern for the treatment of and prospects for rhetoric throughout the academy—the young men and women trained to work in the place where “big” and “little” rhetoric converge. It is reasonable to believe that these purveyors and practitioners of the teaching art would desire and demand the best from their peers, given the opportunity that consultations at a speech center present. Once trained, consultants can and wish to be reliable stewards of the knowledge they have sought to acquire.

The prevailing attitude toward both the idea and the operation of a speech center at any institution plays a key role. Faculty and students quickly gain a sense of administrative appreciation or equivocation for such centers. A speech center will reflect and enact a university's mission, and it can do that with distinction, so long as consultant training is regarded as integral to and representative of that school's overall approach to learning.

1 See Walter R. Fisher's "When Teaching Works: Stories of Communication in Education," *Communication Education* 42:4 (October 1993), 277-367.

2 See "A Symposium on Liberalizing Influences: Great Teachers," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* (Winter 1982), 107-134.

3 This is reminiscent of Richard Weaver's reminder in *Ideas Have Consequences* that "the supposition that facts speak for themselves is of course another abdication of the intellect" (58).

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