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Michael Leff
Northwestern University

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Teaching Public Speaking as Composition

Michael Leff

This article is intended as a call for reform, but I must begin by confessing some uncertainty about what it is that I am attempting to reform. The fact is that I do not have a secure understanding about the state of the art as it is now practiced in teaching public speech. I have not made a survey of the methods now used in classroom instruction, nor undertaken a systematic study of the textbooks, and I have not reviewed the current scholarly literature. What I have to say is based upon personal experience and depends on anecdotes, hunches, and analogies. Thus, I fear that my view of the current situation may be badly distorted, but if it is, this seems the right place to expose the error and stand ready for correction. I can only ask those more familiar with this territory to bear with my speculations long enough to consider the argument I want to develop.

Last year, after an absence of almost twenty years from the basic course, I became the director of the fundamentals public speaking course at Northwestern. My first step, obviously, was to find out what the instructors were doing and to catch up. To my surprise, however, it did not seem that I needed to catch up. The syllabi for the course looked very much as they did in 1970, and the instructors (all of them graduate students) adhered to the same objectives and methods that were in vogue two decades ago. The textbook was more attractive in format and better written than the ones I had used, but it included almost the same set of topics

arranged in more-or-less the same order. A quick glance through a few other currently popular texts indicated that this book was no exception.

Now, everyone knows that teaching is a conservative business and that things change rather slowly at the base of the curriculum. Nevertheless, I was still greatly puzzled by the conservatism displayed in this area. During the past two decades, the academic study of rhetoric has passed through profound and revolutionary changes, and both theory and criticism now appear much different than they once were. In fact, what graduate students in rhetoric are now taught at the top of curriculum bears only a generic resemblance to what I was taught as a graduate student. Yet, they still teach public speaking very much as I taught it. Why?

This question becomes all the more puzzling when we look next door and consider recent developments in English Departments. In that precinct, the rhetorical revolution has made a firm imprint on the basic composition course. The venerable "product" model and its accompanying typology of assignments (e.g. exposition, narration, argument) have receded and seem on the way to extinction. Attention has shifted to the process of composition; students are no longer expected to make a finished product without some help in understanding the process of writing, and assignments have changed accordingly. New approaches to instruction have evolved: Small group conferences are frequently used so that students can critique their own work as an assignment proceeds; classes are taught in a "studio" or "work-shop" environment, where the instructor plays a much less dominant role; and perhaps most dramatically, the writing across the curriculum movement has signaled a fundamental change in attitude about how students can best develop composition skills. At the same time, a variety of different rhetorical theories — expressionist, cognitive, social-epistemic, and others — compete for allegiance, and differing theoretical positions really do have an impact on teaching practices. And

the ideological arguments that appear in the scholarly literature have assumed some importance in thinking about pedagogy. In short, the English Composition course reflects what is happening in the scholarship, and it presents itself as a scene of intense activity, heated controversy, and constant experimentation. So far as I can tell, nothing of the sort has happened in our domain. How can we account for this difference?

In a recent issue of *College Composition and Communication*, I found an article that suggests at least a partial answer to this question. The article, "Identifying and Teaching Rhetorical Plans for Arrangement" by Joanne M. Podis and Leonard A. Podis (1990), obviously does not concern the issue I have just raised. Nevertheless, the stance of its authors reveals something that, if it is not typical, is at least frequent in the composition journals, and the contrast with our literature offers some interesting grounds for speculation.

Podis and Podis want to improve the teaching of arrangement by bringing into focus patterns and expectations that teachers invoke but often do not consciously recognize. For this purpose, they refer to cognitive theory, which offers a way to identify these patterns and raise them to conscious attention. Significantly, however, they use this theory as a general guide for their inquiry rather than as a source for specific principles. The patterns they discover arise from their direct experience in the classroom. That is, they reflect about the draft papers students have submitted, about their reactions to these drafts, and about the results of the re-writing process. As a result of this self-reflection, they identify eight "plans" for textual organization (e.g. the obvious should precede the remarkable). They make no claim that this taxonomy is absolute or exhaustive, and they are mindful that it proceeds from assumptions built into cognitive theory, which places stress on clarity and ease of understanding. Other theoretical interests, they acknowledge, lead to different attitudes about the value of clarity. Consequently, the essay con-

cludes with a consideration of the limitations of their approach and a thoughtful argument about how their findings might prove useful for those who hold a different theoretical position.

From my perspective, the most striking feature of the article is the implicit but clear sense of the subject being studied. The article is *about* composition, specifically about the teaching of composition in a basic course. The rhetoric of the essay itself hinges on the assumption that the audience has a common fund of experience based in the teaching of composition, and the authors also assume that this experience is more fundamental, more basic to the constitution of the audience, than theories that can be applied to or abstracted from practice. Thus, as they blend theory into practice, the authors can pursue a line of theoretical inquiry without losing sight of the primary subject, and they can sustain an appropriate balance in assessing the practical advantages and limitations of their own perspective.

My impression is that rhetoricians who teach public speaking lack this kind generative connection between theory and practice. We do not seem able to invoke an implicit but vital understanding of our own practice as teachers of a practical art. For this reason, among others, our direct experience as in the classroom fades indistinctly into the background, and the pedagogical interest tends to center on theories and methods per se. Typically, we consider how abstract methods or theories might determine our course objectives, or how we might exploit research findings developed elsewhere for some specific application, or how we might discover methods for assessing our effectiveness as teachers. In other words, our scholarship informs our teaching, insofar as it does, from the outside in, and the teaching experience itself seems theoretically uninteresting. The result is that the fit between theory and practice in teaching becomes rather awkward and artificial.

If this speculation has some merit, we might be able to explain *what* has made our pedagogy theoretically inert — namely a lack of commitment to the subject we teach and a corresponding failure to make an organic connection between this subject and our scholarship. Nevertheless, we still would not have answered my original question, which had to do with *why* our pedagogy seems so far removed from our rhetorical scholarship.

Pursuing the comparison and contrast with rhetoricians in English Departments, I would argue that institutional politics are crucially important. For rhetoricians in Communication Departments, the public speaking course rests securely at the base of the curriculum, and it is something that mature scholars escape as they climb the rungs of the career ladder. In our domain, teaching composition or performance, at least in the research institutions, is a task for graduate students and lecturers. Senior faculty teach cultural rhetoric, critical theory, nineteenth-century public address, or some other "content" subject. On the other hand, rhetoricians in English Departments normally operate within a more restricted environment, since, insofar as they are actually rhetoricians and not literary scholars going through a probationary ritual, they must retain connection with the teaching of composition and cannot flee the subject. Consequently mature, theoretically sophisticated scholars continue to teach composition, or at any rate, teach advanced courses that are supposed to have a more-or-less direct bearing on the teaching of composition.

If we are inclined to make invidious comparisons (and academics always are), we might interpret this difference as an advantage to rhetoricians on our side of the fence. After all, the rhetorician in English seems confined, chained to the basics. Yet, this same image might also suggest a less comforting assessment. Lacking connection through teaching the basics, we are not so well linked together in community, and given the amorphous nature of rhetoric as a subject, our scholarship runs the risk of scattering, specializing, and losing

the texture of shared experience. That this hazard is actual and not just potential becomes clear when we move away from the public speaking course and consider areas that fall within the central focus of rhetorical scholarship.

In the case of rhetorical criticism, for example, the tenuous connection between theory and practice is as much apparent as it is in our pedagogy. Moreover, efforts to remedy this problem (my own included) have been frustrated because of the sprawl of rhetorical practice and the strong temptation to turn from the study of practice toward rather abstract theory. That is, in the absence of a reasonably well defined domain for practice, critics tend to speculate about practice in theoretical terms rather than to focus upon specific instances. Moreover, since the theories and ideologies that enter into such speculation are almost boundless, critics do not often share common ground even in respect to their experience as critics. Theory, thus, becomes detached from grounded arguments about the interpretation of practice. In a recent essay, Thomas Benson indicates a manifestation of this problem in terms of an odd asymmetry that exists in our literature. Rhetorical theorists, Benson observes, "typically do not draw heavily upon historical and critical studies. It is more common for theorists to cite other theorists.... Historians and critics are more likely to cite theory or attempt to contribute to theory than theorists are likely to draw on history and criticism" (1989, p. 16).

In other words, the study of practice generated in our own literature seems to have little influence on our theoretical work. This situation raises a substantial problem in respect to the fit between theory and practice, but perhaps more important, it also encourages a dispersion of effort. Since the study of practice does not build on itself, the range of the scholarship remains unlimited, and individual studies become additive rather than cumulative. Unfortunately, we seem to lack the common experience working on the same subjects that seems required for a disciplinary consciousness.

My point, then, is that by concentrating on public speaking as composition, we might serve two purposes at once. We might be able to generate better, more innovative, and more theoretically interesting approaches to teaching the basic course. At the same time, if we viewed the public speaking class as an important arena of rhetorical practice, and not just as a burden imposed upon us, we might discover a shared referent that could help focus and invigorate rhetorical scholarship as a communal enterprise. A serious interest in public speaking as rhetorical composition might provide precisely what we now lack — a practical ground for blending theory and practice — since it offers us a common locus for experiencing the interplay between theory and practice.

I realize that this is not a modest proposal and that it runs counter to a well established tradition that segregates "skills courses" from what are normally conceived as our higher and more "scholarly" concerns. Thus, to accept it would require some fundamental changes in our thinking and our behavior. We would have to stop thinking of the public speaking course as nothing more than a "service" enterprise; we would have to conceive it as something integral to our mission as teachers and scholars; we would have to engage senior faculty in the course and challenge them to connect what they know about rhetoric to the fundamentals of practice; and we would have to be willing to open the course to new ideas and to experiments that might alter its familiar and comfortable structure. These changes will not be easy to effect, and perhaps the task is impossible. Yet, one of the functions of the rhetorician is to turn the impossible into a possibility, and I hope that this essay is a step in just that direction.

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