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Context is Key: Situational Rhetoric and its Impact in the Consultation Room

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In writing, speaking, and movement, without context society would be unable to communicate and function at the capacity it does today. Oftentimes, the context of a situation is understood with only a few words, a nod, or even by simply residing within a location. In most aspects of life, context is the undetected force, but in a communication center, verbally acknowledging situational rhetoric and context is key in understanding the needs of the speakers and the purposes of consultations. In order for a communication consultant to best provide feedback within a consultation, he or she must be aware of the speaker's message basic insight on rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer's arenas of the exigence, the audience, and the constraints within the speech. These three aspects of context and situational rhetoric must be determined within the first five minutes of a consultation, because they are crucial to the success of that consultation. This paper argues that by requiring communication consultants to begin all consultations by asking about Lloyd Bitzer's components of situational rhetoric, consultants will have a better understanding of what topics to focus on in a consultation so that the speaker can receive the most beneficial advice possible.

In one of his documented lectures, rhetorician Ivor Armstrong Richards (1965) notes the difficulty of defining the abstract idea of context. Context, he states, embodies, "…anything whatever about the [time] period, or about anything else which is relevant to our interpretation of it" (Richards, 1965, p. 33). Following in the footsteps of Richard, rhetorician Lloyd F.

Bitzer incorporated context into situational rhetoric. Plainly put, the rhetorical situation is "why" an idea is communicated, and context is the specification of this situation. As Bitzer (1992) notes, "We need to understand that a particular discourse comes into existence because of some specific condition or situation which invites utterance" (p.4). Winston Churchill, one of history's most famous orators, proves enlightening when trying to understand situation rhetoric and its role within a speech. Winston Churchill's Address on Dunkirk, a resounding speech rallying British troops and countrymen during the certainty of Germany's invasion of France in World War II, was presented in an exact time and place that added context and passion to the delivery. In any other location, such as at a dinner table or in a time of peace, Winston Churchill's address would not have contained the motivation and create the lasting impression it holds today. Just as with a speech as renowned as Churchill's, every speech has a moment in which it is intended to be spoken. This resting place is where situational rhetoric and context occur.

To determine situational rhetoric, Bitzer outlines three essential pieces of information that work together to create the context of the discourse (1992). First, the exigence is the purpose of the material. This is the reason the paper or presentation was created. Is the argument to inform or persuade? What about an interview or a class project? Secondly, the audience needs to be identified. Crafting an argument to persuade those with drastically opposing

views will take a different approach than relaying information from a textbook during a lecture. The audience of a discourse can range from a physical room full of people to a single individual. Sometimes the audience can even be an unidentified collective. Finally, the context of a situation must have constraints. These constraints, "…have the power to constrain The author's constraints decision[s] and action[s] needed to modify the exigence" (Bitzer, 1992, p.8). These constraints can be categorized into two sections: the author or speaker's constraints, and the situation's constraints. An author's or orator's constraints, or molds in which they produce rhetoric, often are related to personal beliefs, definitions, and motivations, among others. The situation's constraints can be the location and the audience's views of the message. Together the exigence, audience, and constraints form the context, and through context the situation is revealed.

An effective communication center consultation relies on understanding the exigence, audience, and constraints in helping provide speakers with feedback and presentation tips. Consultants should make themselves aware of these aspects of context within the first five minutes of a consultation, ideally even earlier. As Thomas Newkirk (1989) writes, the first five minutes of a consultation, "... act as a kind of a *lead*. The student's [in this case the speaker's] contributions in these opening minutes need to be used to give the conference a mutually agreeable and mutually understood direction" (p. 237). Some communication centers are structured through appointments, which often include specifics as to the speaker's goals during the session. This information should be detailed and provided to the consultant in advance so that he or she is well aware of how to best fit the needs of the speaker (Turner & Sheckels, 2015). Understanding the speaker and their

needs is the first step in understanding the rhetorical situation of the speech. Another aspect of the rhetorical situation is found in the exigence. When the speaker and their constraints are categorized under simple works such as "practice," "organization," or "interview," the first component of context appears.

Along with knowing the speaker, understanding the speech itself is necessary and should be determined within the first few minutes of a consultation. It is important that a consultant know what the exigence of a speech is so that he or she can hone in on what aspects of organization and delivery to emphasize. As mentioned before, a speech to persuade will have specific distinctions that separate it from an informative presentation. The consultant should also be aware of the speech's audience. The audience is, after all, the reason the message deserves to be communicated, and without a basic understanding of those receiving the message, there is a high likelihood that a piece of discourse could fail to accomplish what the speaker intends.

While knowing how to identify each aspect of context is important within a consultation, how can asking these questions become standard practice once a session begins? Communication centers such as the UNC-Greensboro Speaking Center for example rely on consultation forms to identify situational rhetoric. Using specified forms for each type of consultation and encouraging, even requiring, consultants to write down information about these three parts of context allows for the speaker, the consultant, and the center directors to know that each consultation begins with a solid understanding of the speaker's needs. By using consultation forms in this manner, there is written proof that the right questions are being asked and that consultants hold responsibility in the success of the meeting.

Situational rhetoric and understanding the context of a presentation are crucial in an effective communication center consultation. Without a basic understanding of the exigence, the audience, and the personal constraints of a speaker, there would be no adequate starting point in which the consultant can provide feedback that is both easy to perceive and is beneficial. Consultants should be required to ask for this information within the first five minutes of a consultation. Situational rhetoric, though often forgotten in everyday life, is the glue that holds communication together. Without it, discourse as it is known today would be obsolete.

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