

International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship

Volume 2, Issue 1

2005

Article 19

Graduate Students' Perceptions of the Practice of Posting Scholarly Work to an Online Class Forum: Balancing the Rhetorical Triangle

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Graduate Students' Perceptions of the Practice of Posting Scholarly Work to an Online Class Forum: Balancing the Rhetorical Triangle

Caroline L. Park

Abstract

In both healthcare and education, basing one's practice upon research evidence, has become very important. This paper presents the findings from a descriptive analysis of graduate students' perceptions of the practice of posting their scholarly work to a class discussion forum, where it can be read by their peers. The resulting themes are described and discussed in relation to the balance of a model of rhetorical stance or a rhetorical triangle. This will be of interest to instructors facilitating courses with online capacity.

KEYWORDS: graduate student, peer audience, student perception, rhetorical stance, rhetorical triangle, posting online

Online course design varies widely in both content and quality and many university faculty believe that pedagogical course expectations are paramount to online course design and that technical experts should determine the best technology for obtaining a learning outcome. Faculty have been encouraged to ignore the potential possibilities of technology, and focus on educational rigor in the traditional sense (Moiduser, Nachimus, Lahav, & Oren, 2000).

While educational rigor is important, instructors who deliver repeated online presentations of courses, frequently encounter novel technological situations. The simple act of submitting a scholarly paper to a faculty member has changed dramatically with the advent of the Internet. Word processing has had a major impact on every student's ability to restructure and revise his/her written work and save it to disc. With Internet-based courses, scholarly papers, composed using word processing programs are entirely paper-free. Students are asked to submit their work electronically. Many faculty even grade papers on their computer screens, and return them electronically, without one word being printed on paper.

The instantaneous transport of scholarly papers, without the need for printing, and the group software used by many universities, which allows posting of documents to everyone listed in the class, offer students the opportunity to simultaneously access their peers' scholarly output. However, there does not appear to be information available in the literature about the prevalence of this practice nor its pedagogical importance.

Within the online courses in the graduate programs in the Center for Nursing and Health Studies at Athabasca University, student sharing occurs in many ways. Students post information about themselves, their expectations, and their responses to the content of particular sections of courses, and to discussion forums. They participate in group activities that lead to graded assignments. In some courses, they critique each other's written work in small groups and they present online seminars to their classmates.

While many of these activities appear to mirror practices observed in traditional face-to-face graduate seminars, the practice of sharing written scholarly papers does not. For this to be comparable, each student would have to submit enough copies of their scholarly work for the faculty member and each student in the class to have a copy. In a class with 20 students, each one would go home from class with 19 papers, of indeterminate length.

Little is known about the practice of posting every student's scholarly paper to a discussion forum within an online course. Is it a positive or negative experience for the students involved? Does it have added value for the student and/or faculty member? The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to address the following question: How do graduate students perceive the experience of posting their scholarly work in a forum where all of their classmates can read it? A secondary purpose is to examine the study findings using a model of rhetoric.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The posting of scholarly work to a class forum does not have a descriptor title in the research literature. It is not an assessment practice, but certainly can lead to assessment. It is not a collaborative activity, although students can learn from the work of their classmates. It is not a peer review as no critique is required. In searching the literature for discussions of this practice, only one reference was found. Hilsop (1997) stated that when comparing a traditional graduate program at Drexel University to an asynchronous online program "93% [of students] found it useful to see the ideas and assignments of other students" (p.4).

THE RHETORICAL ACT

Teachers and researchers in the fields of writing and communication have been using models of rhetoric to describe student expression (either written or spoken), for many years. Booth (1963) is credited with the first triangular model recognizing Aristotle's treatise *Rhetoric*. Aristotle's Logos, Ethos and Pathos become Argument, Speaker and Audience. Rhetorical stance is "a stance which depends upon discovery and maintaining in any writing situation a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience and the voice, the implied character of the speaker" (p.141). This model has been used and modified by many. Bitzer (1968) altered the three elements to show the difference between communication and persuasion (p.3). The three elements became: exigency (the problem), audience (those influenced by the message), and the "constraints or limitations arising out of settings or speakers abilities and attitudes" (p. 6).

Today the rhetorical situation is commonly depicted in the rhetorical triangle. Two depictions of the same model are found (Figure 1). The differences are related to whether the side of the triangle or the angle itself represents each element.

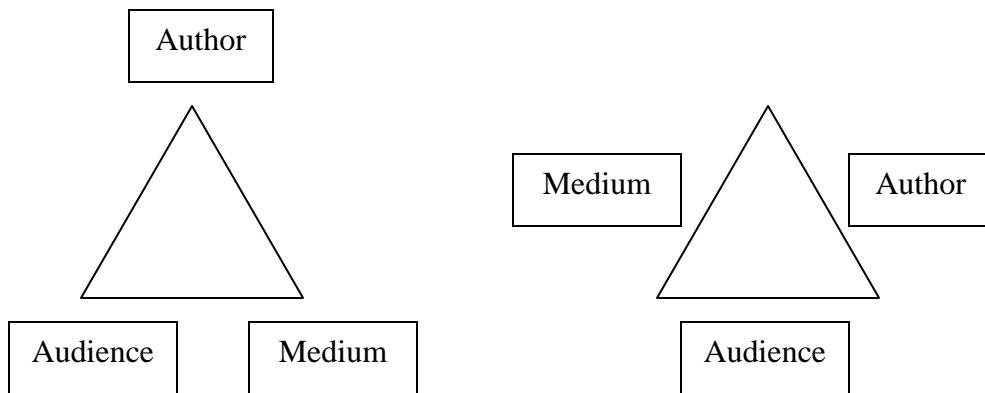


Figure 1. Depictions of the rhetorical act

In the rhetorical situation, all three components converge to create a rhetorical act, of writing or speaking. Context is sometimes positioned in the middle of the triangle, depicting the situation in which the rhetoric is embedded. In an equilateral triangle such as the ones above, the three outside elements exert equal force and hence, the rhetorical act is balanced.

METHOD

A qualitative descriptive analysis of graduate students' written perceptions about sharing their scholarly papers with peers in one course was undertaken. "Qualitative descriptive study is the method of choice when straight descriptions of phenomena are desired" (Sandelowski, 2000). "Recently, health education researchers have applied this method to examine trends and patterns of coverage, content of messages on health issues and concerns as mirrored in the media and other educational materials, and have explored latent themes and other finer substances" (Nandy & Sarvela, 1997, p. 222). Due to the nature of the study, ethics board review was sought but determined that not required. (<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/policystatement/policystatement.cfm>).

One of the course assignments was a written scholarly paper to be posted in an assignment forum. Students were informed that the practice of posting scholarly papers was undertaken to share the work and materials they had produced, and that the caliber of work at this level was important to everyone in the group, not just the instructor. There was no expectation of critique or grading related to sharing papers. Students were told that they could communicate with

each other about the scholarly papers if they so chose. The scholarly papers had one theme, demonstrating if there is evidence for a particular healthcare practice, chosen by the student.

Participants

The participants were 19 students enrolled in the Evidence-based Practice Course in the fully online Masters of Health Studies at Athabasca University. The majority of students were nurses, but other health professions (i.e., laboratory technology, kinesiology, occupational therapy), were also represented. Two students were male. Most had completed seven or eight courses prior to this one. This was the first course in the program for one student. All courses in the program use the WebCT learning platform. Students would have previously been exposed to varying methods of presenting work online, both individually and in groups, in other courses.

Data collection

In the last week of the course, students customarily comment on the course they are completing. They are encouraged to comment on its strengths and weaknesses and whether it met their expectations. In this particular section, students were invited (in writing) to comment on the practice of posting their scholarly papers to a public forum within the course. They were told that the instructor was planning to write an article on the practice, that it was purely voluntary, and that if they wanted to participate in the discussion but not have their comments used by the instructor, they could choose that as an option.

Twenty-seven separate comments about posting scholarly papers were submitted by these 19 students to the conference forum within the course. This data was treated as focus group data, as everyone could read and contribute to the comments of those posting prior to them.

RESULTS

Three themes emerged from the data. These were "the positive learning experience of reading assignments", "the negative feelings induced by posting own scholarly work", and "balance or mediating perceptions", which could be considered neutral or neutralizing.

The Positive Learning Experience of Reading Assignments

The majority of comments reflected positive perceptions. These were grouped as follows: the value of being able to read the *best* assignments, the merit in seeing alternate approaches to an assignment and/or knowing that there were common interpretations of the assignment, learning about relevant topics, and learning to write a better paper. Several students commented generally on the usefulness of this learning experience: "the class is positive and encouraging so I had no qualms"; "I have learned so much about writing papers by reading my classmates' papers. I am always so impressed by everyone's writing skills. For me it has been very beneficial"; [it is a] "great, safe forum for exploring ideas and honing skills, particularly in writing and expressing ideas". One comment stands alone, and could be viewed as positive or negative. "I found this class to be very positive and encouraging so I had no qualms about posting. However, I have been in classes where people are more critical than helpful. The anonymity of the program does help to limit this though".

Negative Feelings Induced by Posting Own Scholarly Work

Negative feelings could be grouped as follows: stress, concern, nerve wracking aspects of the activity, and intimidation (although in almost all instances these concerns were projected). Examples of projection included: "various members of my extended family were shocked that our assignments were posted for everyone to read"; "I would have been quite intimidated and anxious actually if I had been asked to post my assignment during my first or second course".

Three students commented on the lack of structure to the exercise of posting their papers. "I think an important factor is that it is made clear what the purpose of the posting is. What is the impact of someone who does not receive any comments? Could be a bit of a downer I would think." Other comments included: "It is hard to know what to take away"; "I'm wondering if there needs to be more clarity about the purpose. Sometimes it stimulates conversation but it seems we are reluctant to offer a serious critique of each other's work".

Other negative perceptions included the technical difficulties encountered with incompatible word processing programs and specific anxiety relating to posting first, if posting was not simultaneous. One student noted that it should be the student's choice to post the scholarly paper.

Balance or Mediating Perceptions

The following two comments best represent the concept of balance. "The value of assistance to course learning balanced my stress and concerns" and "[It is] intimidating but I recognize how wonderful it is to be able to read so many other great papers".

When students were discussing the balance between the positive and negative aspects of posting the scholarly paper they frequently mentioned conditions which mediated the experience. These included trust and support of classmates, timing of the assignment, clarity of the message, and anonymity. There were several illustrative comments; "I would have been mortified if asked to post to in my first-class", "[this is] the first course that I took after a zillion years, I had to post a paper and was very anxious about it", "at the beginning of each course I feel anxious and knowing that it will need to post a paper tends to add to this anxiety but as the course develops a true learning community develops". This feeling was not universal. One student who self identified as being in his/her first "Internet class" stated "I quite liked the idea of posting our papers. It was a useful way to learn of recent evidence about topics that were relevant to my practice as well as to see how others conduct a search for the best practices. The class atmosphere has been very supportive".

DISCUSSION

The many positive perceptions indicate that the students did feel that reading the assignments of their classmates online was a learning experience in itself. They assimilated content and alternate approaches to an assignment, and saw what good and not-so-good papers look like. The literature on teaching writing skills recommends showing students examples of well written papers or paragraphs, but there does not seem to be anything extolling the value of sharing all papers from one group on a particular assignment. Assuming that educators would like to encourage positive learning outcomes from sharing online papers, decreasing or eliminating the negative perceptions that accompany this activity, or at least creating an acceptable balance is worthy of consideration.

Conceptualizing the Data Using a Model of Rhetoric

The practice of posting student scholarly papers to a class forum is a rhetorical act in a rhetorical situation. Because student data contains expressions of the acceptability of posting, when there is a balance between the positive

outcomes and the negative perceptions, the assumption being made is that a balanced rhetorical situation is positive and desirable.

To develop this model as a framework through which the perceptions of the subjects in this study could be examined, it is necessary to specify the components. In his study, there were two potential rhetorical situations. The first was the request for posting to the forum (medium) by the instructor (author). The second was the posting of each assignment (medium) by the student (author).

Rhetorical situation #1. The instructor (author), through a written electronic message (medium), asks the students (audience) in the online graduate course to post their scholarly papers to a class forum (context). In this context, there is no grading relating to this activity, no collaborative activity, and no peer critique.

Rhetorical situation #2. The student (author), through electronic posting to a forum, shares a scholarly paper (medium) with everyone else in the class (audience) in an online graduate course (context).

A third rhetorical situation is also possible, but was not involved in this study. It is one with which these students would be most familiar and to which they might compare the situation in question.

Rhetorical situation #3. The student (author), through electronic posting via e-mail (medium), shares a scholarly paper with the instructor (audience) in an online graduate course (context).

Rhetorical Stance

In 1963, Booth wrote about the needed balance of what he called the rhetorical stance. He identified three "corruptions" that disturb the balance of the triangle. These corruptions are the advertisers, "who undervalue the subject and overvalue pure effect" (p.143), the entertainers, "who sacrifice substance to personality and charm" (p.144) and the pedants, who "ignore or underplay the personal relationship of speaker and audience and depend entirely on statements about a subject" (p.141). All three utilize the forces of rhetoric for their own purposes. When one or more forces are out of proportion different triangles are depicted.

In the rhetorical situation introduced to students in this online course, the increase in audience (peers rather than or in addition to instructor) as a force, was

not in proportion to the other forces, creating an unbalanced situation. In this rhetorical situation, the audience changed from the usual instructor, to the "corrupted" entire class. The triangles in Figure 2 illustrate this situation. The audience is either the larger angle or larger side of the triangle.

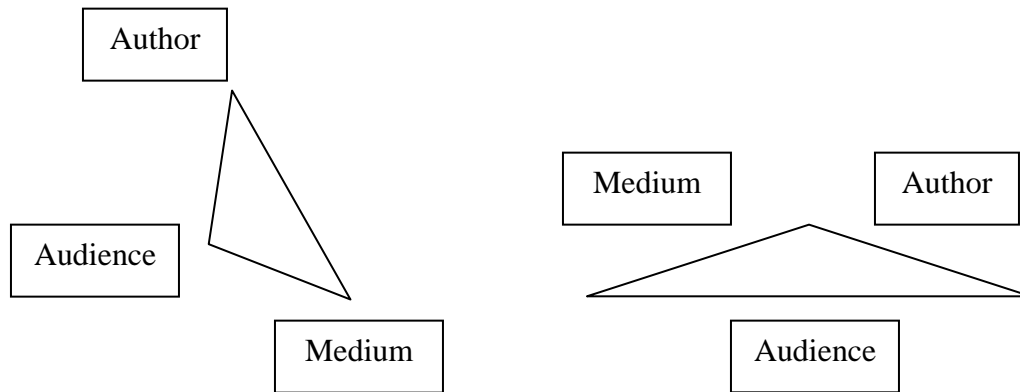


Figure 2. Unbalanced triangles

Upsetting the Balance by Changing the Audience

If students express negative perceptions about the activity of posting their scholarly work to a class forum without experiencing the balance of the positive, then the assumption that the rhetorical triangle is "corrupted", or not balanced can be made. The negative feelings found in the data included stress and concern and several references to intimidation or being intimidated. "Intimidation is a phenomenon of human interaction which everyone has experienced. Its components are fear, power, authority, guilt, and others" (Hendrickson, 2000, p.1). Hendrickson identified the "what, who, how, where, and why of intimidatory acts and discussed the intimidation which occurs in another type of interaction: "interacting with print" (p. 1) . According to Hendrickson, teachers' class policies are potentially an example of intimidating tactics. Posting a scholarly paper, therefore, could be viewed as an intimidating teaching practice.

According to Hendrickson (2000) not every student in the class feels intimidated. This is because "intimidatees are kakorrhaphiophobic; that is, they fear failure. They also fear disapproval, rejection, criticism, looking stupid, and being

helpless" (p.1). Following Hendrickson's argument, one might expect that some students would be fearful of many things in this and other rhetorical situations. Posting an assignment to the entire class versus posting it only to the instructor definitely increases the size of the audience before whom one could fail. Presenting a poor scholarly paper to an instructor is perceived by students as being more private than exposing work to the entire class. It is also the practice with which they are familiar.

In this study, several sources of fear experienced by students were disclosed. One student, now completing a fifth course and confident writing a paper, said, "I didn't want to risk a poor paper in front of my peers". A poor paper could lead to "looking stupid". Several comments related to not knowing what the exact purpose of the posting was. This was a reflection on the quality of the instructor's original message to students as it could cause fear of criticism for not doing everything correctly. One student was fearful in case no one responded to the papers, "That would be a downer". The fears expressed appeared to be "peer-to-peer" as opposed to "top down", a concept identified by Hendrickson (2000). The "top-down" intimidation of being graded by the instructor is common in education and would be expected by these students. However, students in this study were writing a scholarly paper for the instructor and then sharing it with their classmates. They were not writing it for their classmates, but their classmates became an audience.

It cannot be determined if the expressed fears were related to rhetorical situation one or two, or whether they are so closely related that it does not matter. The request to post scholarly papers to the group raised the anticipation of a larger audience viewing the work. The only evidence in the data that the instructor's message was the intimidating factor could be the comment about "choice"; however, even that can be linked to the intimidation associated with posting to the group. Choice could be viewed as eliminating intimidation, allowing students to choose not to post their assignment. However, this approach would have to be examined from a pedagogical perspective. A student who chose not to post a paper could still benefit from the postings of others, resulting in a positive impact for the one hesitant student. However, this would simultaneously result in a negative impact on the rest of the class, who would not have the benefit of sharing that student's work. A solution might be to restrict those who chose not to share their scholarly from reading the work of others. This might create an incentive for everyone to post.

Balance or Mediating Factors

Mediating factors are either attempts by the student (author) to equalize the triangle and restore balance, or efforts by the instructor to prevent an imbalance from occurring in the first place. The following are examples of mediating factors drawn from the data. The feeling of trust or having a sense of community can decrease the power of the audience as a force on the triangle. The audience becomes less intimidating and perceived as a community. Students' confidence in their own work can mediate the fear of audience by strengthening or empowering them. The timing of assignments can facilitate the development of trust and self-confidence in students. The clarity of the instructor's message describing the purpose of posting scholarly papers could increase the individual student's (author) confidence, and strengthen the force in the triangle to balance 'audience'.

Sundre (2004) emphasizes the concept of intentionality of communication saying "when there is collective understanding that something is being undertaken for positive purposes, the potential for damage (or an outright "no-go") is greatly reduced. When positive benefits are not communicated and discussed, the community can feel threats, real or perceived" (p.1). Anonymity, a factor identified by one student can mediate the context of the situation. In this course, all 19 students were known by their real names. They had shared their city of residence and place of employment. The fact that they could not see or hear each other directly is viewed by some as a form of anonymity. Kassop (2003) stated that "many online instructors have also observed that the relative "anonymity" of online discussions helps create a level playing field for women, homosexuals, students with physical handicaps, and members of other potentially marginalized groups, as they can participate in class activities without being stigmatized" (p.6). Brown and Thompson (1997) called this "physical anonymity". They said that "the physical anonymity of the contributors is a great equalizer; more reclusive learners no longer need to struggle for a 'turn to speak'; they can make a contribution to the discussion whenever they like with the surety that it will be 'heard' by all class members" (p. 5). If this is true, then perhaps it is the context of online learning that decreases intimidation, in all instances, not just the posting of scholarly work to the discussion forum. Physical anonymity appears to decrease the disproportionate effect of the audience in this situation.

CONCLUSION

The rhetorical triangle has been used to represent the ideal situation for students with regards to sharing their scholarly work. It can also be used to

demonstrate the potential imbalance described by graduate students in this study. There appear to be definite advantages to students of reading their peers' scholarly work, if the rhetorical triangle can remain balanced. Hendrickson's (2000) argument leads to the conclusion that both of the rhetorical situations described in this study could be intimidating to some of the students. From this small sample, it also appears that the wording of the instructor's communiqué is very important to setting the context and establishing trust. The act of publishing an individual scholarly work to the class forum exposes students to the self-perception that they might "look stupid" to their classmates, a fear previously reserved for the instructor alone. There appear, however, to be mediating factors which help students to balance the fear and acknowledge the positive outcomes of the situation. As well, aspects of the mediating factors can be built into the design of this scholarly activity to minimize the fears and balance the triangle.

Until nurse educators have a more substantive base of evidence about posting scholarly papers online, one might consider the following suggestions prior to instituting the practice. Educators should assess the timing of posting the assignment in relation to students' experience with online courses. Expectations of and benefits from the activity must be clearly written. Course designs that encourage trust and a sense of community should be considered, and group discussion about the tensions and balances of posting scholarly work in a class forum should be encouraged.

This study was exploratory in nature, examining a very small aspect of educational practice. However, it led to intriguing findings. Expanding the use of the model to describe graduate student writing experiences could include structured surveys or interviews comparing posting scholarly work to a class discussion forum with e-mailing it to an instructor. This would provide more insight into the benefits, develop a definition of, and provide rationale for mediating factors. More investigation into the particulars of the three components, author, audience, and medium, in relation to this scholarly practice, would also be beneficial. The model might also be used to explain graduate students' perceptions of other educational practices related to speech, presentation, or writing.

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