

Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing

C. H. Knoblauch
Department of English
SUNY, Albany

In Plato's Gorgias, Socrates takes the rhetorician sternly to task for having mastered, not a true art like medicine or politics, which is grounded in learning and moral commitment, but a mere "knack," like food preparation or personal adornment, where flattering appearances are valued over substance (465A). The rhetorician, he claims, deals only with strategies of persuasion, and with the prescribed formulas of suasive discourse, regardless of the content of a given argument or the justification for seeking to persuade in the first place. Neither learning nor moral commitment is essential to the rhetor as such, but only a technical virtuosity in composing. Potentially, then, the rhetorician is little better than a charlatan, seeming, for example, more knowledgeable about medicine than the doctor, merely by sounding more convincing. For the orator, Socrates asserts, "there is no need to know the truth of the actual matters, but one merely needs to have discovered some device of persuasion which will make one appear to those who do not know to know better than those who know" (459C).

For centuries rhetoricians have struggled to defend themselves from Plato's attacks by arguing, with Aristotle, that an orator must also be a philosopher, literally a lover of wisdom, and by insisting, with Quintilian, that the good orator must first be a good person who joins learning with ethical awareness in the service of responsible conduct. But always these defenses have had about them the odor of rationalized self-interest--like the NRA's insistence that guns don't kill people ("only people kill people"). It isn't rhetoric that deceives, but only the evil orator.... Maybe so, but still, we think, an instrument that begs so conspicuously to be abused is hardly well

defended on the basis of its ostensible moral neutrality. Plato's arguments do not disappear so easily: indeed, they have proven resilient for more than 2000 years. In my opinion, they are unanswerable as long as we are willing to accept their basis, Plato's assumptions about the nature of rhetoric: that it defines nothing more than a set of optional communicative vehicles for ideas that are somehow preconceived; that it offers a collection of empty forms available to good and evil alike for conveying truths--or errors or falsehoods--to a variety of audiences on a variety of (ceremonial) occasions.

Herein lies a problem for contemporary writing teachers. It seems to me that we often do accept Plato's views about the difference between knowledge and articulation, intellectual "content" and verbal "form." And having granted his assumptions, we are vulnerable to his charges. When we speak these days of "the rhetorical approach" to teaching writing, we typically mean a concern for modes and forms of discourse: description, narration, exposition; five-paragraph themes, comparison/contrast essays, topic-sentence paragraphs; plain versus elevated, or correct versus incorrect style. A so-called "rhetoric" textbook talks about these forms, labelling and taxonomizing them as though they really existed out there in Plato's Ideal Space, as though writers selected them in advance from some inventory that the rhetorician is responsible for stocking. A "rhetoric reader" offers presumably typical samples of these modes and forms, though with a revealing cautionary note that--awkwardly--the models seldom demonstrate a single option but instead merge several in peculiar hybrids. Teachers who use "the rhetorical approach" tend to be-

lieve, whether they say it out loud or not, that what students write matters less than how they write it, that learning to manipulate public and professional formulas (the term paper, the business letter) is more important than thinking well in language or discovering personal stances and values, that technical decorum is the focus of a writing course, not the intellectual and moral growth of writers. In "the rhetorical approach" writing tends to be conventionalized and ceremonial, like the famous abortion essay, where the pros and cons have been rehearsed until the subject is now conveniently moribund so that the advantages of comparing-and-contrasting can shine forth without the troubling interference of a live, recalcitrant human issue.

As long as we writing teachers accept Plato's divorce of knowledge from articulation, or teach as though we accepted it, I say Plato was right to call us an unscrupulous lot, engaged in low, dishonest business. How can we at once concede his premises and escape his conclusions? Teaching by "the rhetorical approach" we often demonstrate to our more sophisticated students the trivial, ritualistic nature of classroom writing. We watch them, bored but tolerant, suppressing their intelligence in order to jump through our hoops. Fortunately, that intelligence enables them to survive us and learn to value their writing--as soon as they find readers who also value it. At the same time, though, we also offer weaker minds an art of dissembling, the knack of saying nothing or of recapitulating a party line in polite, decorous prose. The moral lesson for these students is that playing the game and withholding commitment will take you far. Strategic timidity can be worth at least B-. Finally, in the worst cases, usually involving unpracticed writers, we retard the capacity to write while simultaneously extinguishing the desire to try. That is, we make writing superficially difficult by asking students to do it this way instead of that while also making it irrelevant through our insistence on following the rules first and saying something meaningful only after-

wards (if at all). To the extent that we can all recollect these cases, Plato was surely right: our preoccupation with formal propriety can do as much harm as good, and we might be well advised to find a more respectable line of work. Better, perhaps, to do away with writing courses and emphasize composing in the disciplines, where at least it might go on in the context of directed intellectual dialogue and in the interest of new learning. One can find some motivation in history writing or psychology writing, but what is the earthly good of comparison/contrast writing?

Having said all this, however, I am no less enthusiastic about the importance of rhetoric and the value of teaching writing, even in writing courses. What sustains me is not some ingenious answer to Plato's objections (I can't think of any), but rather my unwillingness to accept his assumptions about rhetoric, especially his sense of its restricted role in learning and communicating. Let me offer some alternative assumptions, closer to a modern philosophic temper. As I see it, rhetoric is not brought optionally to the service of some subject, medicine, or law, or history, as an all-purpose, hand-me-down system of forms for anyone's content. Rather, any subject is the very thing it is by virtue of the peculiar cast of its rhetoric: hence, we may speak of the rhetoric of law or the rhetoric of history, meaning those particular language-acts which define a discipline by representing an epistemological as well as methodological context for its practitioners. Apart from discourse, there is no "history"; and apart from rhetoric there is no historical discourse. If we view rhetoric as an art, a practice, a way of doing something, it is the process of using language to organize our experience and communicate it to others. If we view it as a science, in the classical sense, a field of study, its concern is with the multiple ways in which language makes experience intelligible and communicable. As a science, I would locate it in semiotics, the study of how any sign or sign-system organizes experience. And I would locate within rhetoric the study of speech (oral dis-

course), "composition" (in the sense of written discourse), and poetics, the study of discourses claiming distinctive cultural value. From this vantage point, rhetoric is clearly not an "approach" to teaching writing at all: it is, instead, a context for that teaching, a set of attitudes, assumptions, and concepts which together make the teaching of writing a coherent activity. "Techniques" for composition instruction may differ from those useful in teaching oral argument, but a "rhetorical approach" cannot be distinguished from some presumed alternative: rhetoric is generic; composition is specific.

The definitions I have offered evidently alter the classical view of rhetoric. In particular, they acknowledge a much closer connection between knowing and articulating. We use discourse to organize experience--and "ordered experience" is another name for knowledge. Acts of language have heuristic value, as numerous contemporary linguists and composition theorists have argued. Discourse makes knowledge, rather than merely dressing it up for public display. The process of making connections which lies at the heart of learning lies also at the heart of composing, so that verbal composition is a mode of learning, a manifestation of the process of discovering coherence. Discourse also communicates, to be sure, but communicating is neither more nor less important than learning: indeed, the two motives interanimate, to use I. A. Richards' term. In writing we learn about things through the effort to make communicative sense out of them; and we communicate by making the track of our learning visible and in some way meaningful to readers. The harder we work to learn, the richer our communication; the harder we work to communicate, the richer our learning. Given this modern view, Plato's belief that knowledge somehow exists independently of articulation, and the subsequent differentiation of learning from the forms of discourse, is erroneous and unproductive. The process of writing makes form: we do not start from a perception of some formal absolute, filling in a structural shell as we would pour the ingredients of a pie into its

prefabricated crust. The mental effort to make assertions and to connect them as a coherent pattern over time causes form to emerge gradually, unpredictably, contingently, the ultimate achievement of an effort to make meaning in a temporally linear medium. The modern rhetorician's concern, and it should be the writing teacher's concern as well, is not to taxonomize formulas for discourse, but to study and to nurture the capacities by which we make coherence out of the chaos of experience, a coherence which verbal action distinctively enables us to shape.

I would point out in passing that these views are not original to the twentieth century. The revolution in rhetorical theory that they represent has been in progress for some 350 years, since Descartes and Locke challenged the ancient supposition that language was merely the dress of thought. Writing teachers can profit from studying the history of rhetoric in order to discover a more reliable and productive underpinning for their instruction than that offered by Plato and the classical, formalist tradition. But a more important point for now is that, if Plato's theory of discourse is limited, then contemporary teaching based on it is similarly limited. At the same time, since we are slowly elaborating a richer theory, we need not accept ancient assumptions, nor need we suffer the abuse that Socrates directed at Gorgias. Consider an alternative frame of reference for the writing class. I would say that a teacher who accepts the context of modern rhetoric first of all values writers over writing, the unending search for new meaning over the artifacts that are its residue. Texts are not monoliths, incapable of change or growth, but only moments in a lifelong learning experience, a succession of inherently unstable coherences, freely altered and abandoned with the evolution of insight. The teacher is less concerned, then, with formal or technical evaluation, as though **The Text** were primary, than with the quality of a writer's understanding, his or her developing capacity to make statements that matter. The point of writing is to learn by taking imaginative risks;

it is to make, test, and reformulate coherences, not to master rubrics for the ceremonial display of trivial thinking. The teacher-reader's role in nurturing writers is to problematize their premature conclusions about their experience through facilitative responses aimed at stimulating more writing, not labelling errors or insisting on the reader's personal notion of an Ideal Text. The writer strives repeatedly to create order from chaos; the reader monitors the striving through dialogue about the meaningfulness of the (always) emerging discourse. Learning and communicating go on in the context of shared intellectual inquiry, just as they go on in the world we are supposed to be preparing our students to inhabit as thoughtful and responsible human beings.

Can there be a more profoundly ethical activity than the striving to make new meaning through discourse? The matured ability to order experience enables moral choice and responsible action, so that our teaching of writing, which aims at this matured ordering capacity, is intimately connected to the growth of ethical awareness. To view writing as thinking and not just an exercise in formal display is to refute Plato's argument about the superficiality, the ethical indiffer-

ence of rhetoric. It also sensitizes us to our preeminent obligation of making students accountable for what they think and say. There is no true literacy, I suggest, apart from judgment and moral commitment: And the only way to encourage that literacy is to take students' meanings seriously. The writing class is well suited to engaged intellectual inquiry because it need not follow the teacher-based agenda of a "content" course given to introducing a particular subject in a predetermined way. We can allow students to examine their experience, their values and commitments, through reading and writing in directions they find personally significant. The consequence need not be diffuseness or relaxation of academic rigor; on the contrary, it should be an intensified awareness, a deeper penetration of issues arising from the freedom to dwell at length on substantial human questions and to experiment with stances toward them in the presence of a discerning reader. This seems to me our strongest argument for the role of a writing course in the liberal arts curriculum. Importantly, it is an argument based on our recognition that rhetoric is not a "knack" as Plato thought but a fundamental manifesting of the capability for symbolic action that defines our humanity.