

Pre-Workshop Reading

To set the stage for our discussion about what project-based writing can offer, see the characterizations below of the dangers of “regular” school-writing.

Verlyn Klinkenborg, in his *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, addressing student writers:

“Were you asked to write in order to be heard, to be listened to?

Asked to write a piece that mattered to you?

Was there ever a satisfactory answer to the question,

“Why am I telling you this?”

Beside “It’s due on Monday”?

You were taught the perfect insincerity of the writing exercise,

Asked to write pieces in which you didn’t and couldn’t Believe.

You learned a strange ventriloquism,

Saying things you were implicitly being asked to say,

Knowing that no one was really listening.

You were being taught to write as part of a transaction That had

Almost nothing to do with real communication,

Learning to treat the making of sentences as busywork,

A groping for words, an act of drudgery,

A way of dressing up your meaning or your argument with almost no attention to the character of the words or sentences you were using,

Unless you were trying to imitate

The stiff and impersonal manner of ‘formal’ prose.

You were also learning to distrust the reader and yourself.

Do you remember feeling, when you were writing a Paper for school,

That your vocabulary was steadily shrinking?

By the end, the same few words, seemed to be buzzing

Around and around in your head, like flies weary of Feeding.

That’s a symptom of boredom.

You were bored from the start and for good reason. (30-31)

College seniors quoted in Eodice, Geller, and Lerner's *The Meaningful Writing Project*

"I don't remember any meaningful [writing] project [in college] because writing to me is more of a chore for me and I do not find it enjoyable, no matter what the topic. I usually feel that when I am writing for an assignment I am writing for a purpose that is not for myself, I am writing to appease the teacher and I am writing to get an "A" (43)

"Usually the prompts are pretty strict and pretty cut and dry. There's really no wiggle room. A lot of people don't like that...it's like playing in someone else's sandbox. You go there and you've got to know these rules and you can't do this, you can't do that, you've got to do this, this is the right way. If you get your own sandbox to do this stuff in, then you're more apt to have fun with it." (88)

Jasper Neel in his *Plato, Derrida, and Writing* (1988) laments when students produce what he calls "anti-writing": "I am not writing. I hold no position," Neel parodies. "I have nothing at all to do with discovery, communication, or persuasion. I care nothing about the truth. What I *am* is an essay. I announce my beginning, my parts, my ending, and the links between them. I announce myself as sentences correctly punctuated and words correctly spelled"

Neal Lerner quoting Carolyn Keys in his article "Laboratory Lessons for Writing and Science" (p. 213)

In this climate, it is no wonder that student writing about science is rote, mechanistic, and dull. According to Carolyn Keys (1999),

When all the students in the class obtain the same results to an activity, and there is only one scientifically acceptable outcome, the learners quickly realize that they must somehow generate, copy, or paraphrase the knowledge claim that is desired by the teacher. Thus, writing in this genre can easily become a rote activity, especially when the students have no opportunity to determine the appropriate methods for the investigation, ways to display the data, or new meanings for the data. (p. 125)

Theresa Lillis (2002) quoted in Eodice, Lerner, and Geller's *The Meaningful Writing Project*

"It is difficult to get close to individual desires for meaning making within the context of the culture of [Higher Education]: student-writers' efforts are inevitably channeled into working out what is acceptable within [Higher Education], rather than exploring what they might want to mean" (88)

Excerpt from Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" (1968), which can help us think about how different real rhetorical exigence from the kinds of writing situations lamented above:

It seems clear that rhetoric is situational. . . .

In order to clarify rhetoric-as-essentially-related-to-situation, we should acknowledge a viewpoint that is commonplace but fundamental: a work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions

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ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change. In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive.

To say that rhetorical discourse comes into being in order to effect change is altogether general. We need to understand that a particular discourse comes into existence because of some specific condition or situation which invites utterance. Bronislaw Malinowski refers to just this sort of situation in his discussion of primitive language, which he finds to be essentially pragmatic and "embedded in situation." He describes a party of fishermen in the Trobriand Islands whose functional speech occurs in a "context of situation."

The canoes glide slowly and noiselessly, punted by men especially good at this task and always used for it. Other experts who know the bottom of the lagoon . . . are on the look-out for fish. . . . Customary signs, or sounds or words are uttered. Sometimes a sentence full of technical references to the channels or patches on the lagoon has to be spoken; sometimes . . . a conventional cry is uttered. . . . Again, a word of command is passed here and there, a technical expression or explanation which serves to harmonize their behavior towards other men. . . . An animated scene, full of movement, follows, and now that the fish are in their power the fishermen speak loudly, and give vent to their feelings. Short, telling exclamations fly about, which might be rendered by such words as: “Pull in,” “Let go,” “Shift further,” “Lift the net.”

In this whole scene, “each utterance is essentially bound up with the context of situation and with the aim of the pursuit. . . . The structure of all this linguistic material is inextricably mixed up with, and dependent upon, the course of the activity in which the utterances are embedded.” Later the observer remarks: “In its primitive uses, language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behaviour. It is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection.”¹

These statements about primitive language and the “context of situation” provide for us a preliminary model of rhetorical

situation. Let us regard rhetorical situation as a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance; this invited utterance participates naturally in the situation, is in many instances necessary to the completion of situational activity, and by means of its participation with situation obtains its meaning and its rhetorical character. In Malinowski's example, the situation is the fishing expedition — consisting of objects, persons, events, and relations — and the ruling exigence, the success of the hunt. The situation dictates the sorts of observations to be made; it dictates the significant physical and verbal responses; and, we must admit, it constrains the words which are uttered in the same sense that it constrains the physical acts of paddling the canoes and throwing the nets. The verbal responses to the demands imposed by this situation are clearly as functional and necessary as the physical responses.

Traditional theories of rhetoric have dealt, of course, not with the sorts of primitive utterances described by Malinowski — “stop here,” “throw the nets,” “move closer” — but with larger units of speech which come more readily under the guidance of artistic principle and method. The difference between oratory and primitive utterance, however, is not a difference in function; the clear instances of rhetorical discourse and the fishermen's utterances are similarly functional and similarly situational. Observing both the traditions of the expedition and the facts before him, the leader of the fishermen finds himself *obliged* to speak at a given moment — to command, to supply information, to praise or blame — to respond appropriately to the situation. Clear instances of artistic rhetoric exhibit the same character: Cicero's speeches against Cataline were called forth by a specific union of persons, events, objects, and relations, and by an exigence which amounted to an imperative stimulus; the speeches in the Senate rotunda three days after the assassination of the President of the United States were actually required by the situation. So controlling is situation that we should consider it the very ground of rhetorical activity, whether that activity is primitive and productive of a simple utterance or artistic and productive of the Gettysburg Address.



Hence, to say that rhetoric is situational means: (1) rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem; (2) a speech is given *rhetorical* significance by the situation, just as a unit of discourse is given significance *as* answer or *as* solution by the

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question or problem; (3) a rhetorical situation must exist as a necessary condition of rhetorical discourse, just as a question must exist as a necessary condition of an answer; (4) many questions go unanswered and many problems remain unsolved; similarly, many rhetorical situations mature and decay without giving birth to rhetorical utterance; (5) a situation is rhetorical insofar as it needs and invites discourse capable of participating with situation and thereby altering its reality; (6) discourse is rhetorical insofar as it functions (or seeks to function) as a fitting response to a situation which needs and invites it. (7) Finally, the situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution. Not the rhetor and not persuasive intent, but the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity — and, I should add, of rhetorical criticism.