Chapter 17

The Risk of Rhetorical Inquiry: Practical Conditions for a Disruptive Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author provides a theoretical outline for a practice of rhetorical inquiry in the college writing classroom, and focuses on three conditions that permit this inquiry to enact a “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler, 1999). The first condition calls for pedagogues to amplify the performative dimension of language to disrupt what Dewey terms the “quest for certainty.” Second, students and teachers work to reconfigure their current perspectives through undergoing dialogic encounters between incongruous perspectives. Third, these performative and dialogic encounters must reiterate with increasing complexity and within increasingly unfamiliar and complex contexts. After an extensive theoretical exposition of these three conditions for a disruptive pedagogy, the author presents a few illustrative instances in the college writing classroom.

INTRODUCTION

To have an experience [with language] is an activity of a human subject who, through one method or another, controls and manages and possesses that experience as his own. In contrast, to undergo an experience with language means that language strikes us, befalls us, overcomes us, overwhelms and, most importantly, transforms us. [...] Indeed, Heidegger calls the hermeneutical experience of language “the event of Appropriation,” an event that occurs when words overcome and overwhelm and transform us. (Worsham, 1987, pp. 227-228)
Building from Heidegger’s (1971) view, Worsham argued to disrupt the drive to codify and systematize writing, and to persuade writing instructors to remain open to the inquiry language invites us to undergo. For Heidegger, to “undergo an experience with language … means to let ourselves be properly concerned by the claim of language by entering into and submitting to it” (p. 57). What would it mean to submit to and properly take up the claim language poses rather than merely pursue the conservative aim to master its complexities and codify it into handy simplicity? At the most immediate level, submitting to language’s claim promises to disrupt the conservative norm that regards language as a mere conceptual tool to be understood prior to use. Furthermore, if we accept the invitation to undergo this experience, we confront a novel insight concerning the relationship between identity and language: despite commonplace understanding, we do not use language - not at all. Rather, language uses us.

I will extend Worsham’s project while pursuing precisely what she questions by prescribing how writing instruction might work to disrupt the drive to control and master language. This frame includes three practical conditions that promote a rhetorical inquiry wherein both students and instructors challenge and disrupt the drive to pursue what Dewey (1929) calls the “quest for certainty” (p. 8). This inquiry promises to cultivate rhetorical intelligence sufficient to respond to problems that unfamiliar genres of activity pose to us, problems that challenge and displace the certainty we strive to possess about what we already know (Darwin, 2003; Fleming, 2003).

The rhetorical practices of articulation, reconfiguration, and reiteration comprise the three practical conditions for rhetorical inquiry:

1. **Articulating** or amplifying the often-overlooked performative dimension of language calls both speakers and addressees to acknowledge and take up the transformative claim language makes;

2. **Reconfiguring** a perspective held with certainty occurs through undergoing a dialogic encounter with an equally compelling but incongruous perspective;

3. **Reiterating** or cross-appropriating the first two conditions within a series of increasingly complex and unfamiliar contexts works to cultivate rhetorical intelligence.

Cultivating rhetorical intelligence calls for us to be receptive to the anomalous within everyday situations, and consequently, to allow the anomalous to challenge and disrupt conservative norms.

**BACKGROUND**

The most notable forebears of rhetorical inquiry are the Old Sophists of Ancient Athens, who attracted customers with tantalizing promises. By empowering students to practice making the weaker argument appear to be the stronger and to see themselves as the measure of all things, Protagoras promised his students they would develop the rhetorical power to maintain their personal lives such that they could act within the political arena - a promise Plato anxiously interrogated as ungrounded in real knowledge (Plato, 1961). This educational promise continued with the rhetorical education that was productive of Isocrates’ rhetor seeking advantage; of Cicero’s ideal, philosophical orator delighting, moving, and educating with eloquent wisdom; and of Vico’s rhetor inventing from the topics of the sensus communis in order to bring phrenesis - a practical, rhetorical wisdom - to bear on the course of civic life (Ijsseling, 1976; Atwill, 1998).

This line of pedagogic practice enacts an inquiry into everyday, situated rhetorical practice: After unraveling the view that understands human beings as substances to be known and mastered, rhetorical inquiry reveals us to be history-shaping beings participating with and contributing to others engaged in everyday situations (Spinosa et al,
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