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Why Rhetoric and Ethics? Revisiting History/Revising Pedagogy

Lois Agnew

Any attempt to revitalize the relationship between rhetoric and ethics is challenged by traditional depictions of Western rhetorical history. Those accounts often prod us toward well-known binary frameworks that suggest that rhetoric and ethics are not strong allies, and may even have antithetical goals: closed hand/open fist, truth/contingency, certain knowledge/situated judgment. It is critical for our field to revisit rhetorical history in order to challenge the strict opposition between rhetoric and ethics that has been inscribed in our tradition since Plato's attack on the sophists. This challenge can highlight a longstanding interest in rhetoric's role in cultivating an ethical disposition and fostering respectful relationships with people with whom one does not agree—a role that includes a delicate balance between somewhat stable notions of appropriate conduct and the intrinsically bounded, contextual, and contingent nature of rhetoric.

Although rhetoric's complex ethical function has historically been acknowledged by many traditions, I share John Duffy's view that ethics merits greater attention from the field of rhetoric and writing studies. My focus in this presentation is on the particular significance this area of inquiry can have for the undergraduate writing major. The establishment of majors in writing has signaled our field's coming of age. Thomas Moriarty and Greg Giberson identify this moment as "a milestone," adding, "We finally have a place in the undergraduate catalog, on the department Web site, a prominent place that puts us on equal footing with other disciplines" (204). These majors offer the field's response to David Fleming's 1998 essay, "Rhetoric as a Course of Study," in which Fleming identifies the establishment of a major as a central way in which rhetoric's pedagogical mission can be recaptured after a period of stagnation in the 1990s. Fleming's article depicts a cultural moment in which rhetoric's presence in English departments is confined to "the two extremes of higher education: at one end, a fifteen-week course on writing for incoming freshmen; at the other, a multi-year program of advanced study for PhD students. Between the two, there is little or nothing" (173). Fleming proposes that this void can best be filled by an undergraduate major, which could constitute a true "test for the revival of rhetoric in English Departments" (173). The fifteen years following Fleming's essay reveal that undergraduate majors have indeed become a feature of rhetoric's revival in a number of institutions across the country.

The undergraduate major has expanded the territory of the field through the development of a curriculum supporting the wide array of future careers that majors might pursue; this in turn extends a pattern of diversity among ways of approaching research and pedagogy that have long existed in the field as a result of competing visions of rhetoric's scope and mission. Richard Fulkerson's 2005 characterization of the field concludes with an emphasis on fragmentation: "Composition studies is a less unified field than it was a decade ago. We differ about what our courses are supposed to achieve, about how effective writing is best produced, about what an effective classroom looks like, and

about what it means to make knowledge” (680–81). David Beard also emphasizes disciplinary fragmentation, but from the perspective of the varied institutional locations that house rhetorical studies. Beard supports his claim that “fragmentation may be the norm in rhetorical education” (132) with a detailed explication of the varying locations where rhetoric may be found across the university, a point that leads him to conclude, “As much as rhetoric is part of the core of our discipline, it is also our greatest liability” (130). Beard sees the fragmentation revealed in his survey as particularly significant for writing programs that are considering the establishment of writing majors, arguing that “institutional realities militate against the possibility of such a thing” (149).

While the growth of writing majors suggests that Beard’s pessimism may be misplaced, it is the case that the fractured identities of rhetoric and composition, writing studies, and English studies are particularly challenging for undergraduate students to navigate. More than those disciplines focused on the mastery of the mastery of discrete content, our field’s emphasis on productive knowledge has left the central goals of the major open to debate. These discussions, taking place in conference presentations, journals, and edited collections, as well as in the hallways and conference rooms of the departments in which writing majors are housed, demonstrate the vitality of our discipline and the multiple points of entry that we can offer to undergraduate students as they prepare for their academic, professional, and public lives. At the same time, many people have sought unifying principles that will provide the undergraduate major with a more definite identity. A number of scholars argue that rhetoric provides a sufficient focus, but rhetoric’s well-known flexibility allows for its diffusion across the curriculum in ways that are sometimes imperceptible to students and teachers alike. Rhetoric has often been connected to the notion of a major that promotes engagement with civic life (Fleming, Moriarty/Giberson), but it has also been conceived as offering a framework for a major focused on professional writing (Baker and Henning) and establishing a disciplinary link to other liberal arts disciplines. While these variations reflect rhetoric’s strength and adaptability, the possibility also exists that the pervasive use of the term rhetoric will promote a type of invisibility that will result in a major without any organizing principle.

Such an organizing principle can be provided by a focus on rhetoric and ethics. The ethical concerns that surround language use are relevant to students whose primary interests lie in professional communication, civic writing, rhetorical history, and creative nonfiction. Weaving ethical concerns into the fabric of the writing major can provide the unifying framework that every undergraduate major needs, while providing students with space to pursue a wide array of objectives. This approach holds significant benefit for students, as it offers both historical perspective and a nuanced and contextually sensitive understanding of contemporary issues that surround writing and language. Tracking complicated debates about language, identity, and ethics that have taken place across centuries of rhetoric’s development can help students challenge the binaries that they often encounter in contemporary discussions of language and public life. Students who explore the ethical complexities that surround language are uniquely positioned to be more successful and sensitive users of language in various civic, professional, personal, and academic contexts.

This assumption has provided the basis for the development of a 400-level core course titled "Rhetoric and Ethics" in the Syracuse University writing and rhetoric major. Established six years ago in one of the first stand-alone writing programs in the country, the Syracuse Writing and Rhetoric major reflects the widely varying areas of expertise of the faculty and the diverse interests that our students bring to us. Prior to the development of the major, the upper-division curriculum included courses focused on professional and technical communication, new media, creative nonfiction, civic writing, and issues surrounding language, literacy, politics, and identity. While this assortment has promised new writing majors who are uncertain about their future aspirations with room to devise a course of study that makes sense to them, such breadth might have created so disparate an array of learning experiences that students would have difficulty seeing the connections among them. In order to support their understanding of these connections and to foster their exploration of options within the major, we developed a series of four core courses: a 200-level course that offers an introduction to rhetorical histories and concepts, 300-level courses in digital writing and professional writing, and a 400-level course on rhetoric and ethics.

The structure of the rhetoric and ethics course engages students with the task of connecting historical inquiry with their consideration of contemporary concerns, and it also encourages their reflection about the profound significance of language. At the beginning of the course, students explore rhetorical histories that assume links among language, character, and community, which provide models that help them consider the value that comes from taking language seriously, hold themselves accountable for their speech and writing, and imagine productive ways in which language can foster strong social relationships. This inquiry can also illuminate complexities that arise as individuals pursuing a vision of "the collective good" encounter others whose vision conflicts with theirs—and as communities defining the "good character" manifested in language simultaneously establish restrictions that implicitly connect deviance from the norm with moral deficiency.

Students' reflections on these topics are supported through their encounters with a range of historical texts dealing with themes that include rhetoric's civic responsibilities, the ethical challenges that inevitably surround acts of persuasion, the fraught historical relationship between rhetorical proficiency and character, and the reciprocal relationship between rhetorical technologies and cultures. Their thoughtful engagement with these texts provides students with a framework for recognizing a range of complex contemporary issues such as debates over language diversity, campus protests over censorship, digital circulation, the use of images to support persuasive purposes, and the challenges of providing rhetorical access for individuals with disabilities. Acknowledging the long and complex histories surrounding the relationship between rhetoric and ethics helps students recognize that contemporary issues function within intellectual contexts that might not be immediately apparent to them. Their ability to take those historical contexts into account as they respond to contemporary questions adds depth and breadth to their engagement with contemporary issues and promotes a useful awareness that every encounter with language has profound ethical significance. Attention to the vexed issues that have surrounded attempts to construct "ethical discourse" across centuries of rhetorical history can help students identify dominant lines of thought that have shaped

contemporary assumptions about how rhetoric functions in public life—an important step for undergraduate majors who are prepared to carry insights from our field into various careers and whose relationships with public life are in early stages of development.

This course's examination of the fraught relationship of rhetoric and ethics provides the type of cohesion many undergraduate writing majors lack, and it also offers students an opportunity for the type of critical reflection about language that they will need as individuals, professionals, and citizens. Asserting that this recognition is a fundamental goal of the writing major has important implications for our understanding of our broader disciplinary identity. Recognizing the centrality of ethics in rhetorical traditions and practices opens the path to a conception of a writing major and a discipline that acknowledges the breadth and variety that defines our discipline, while offering the important recognition that ethical concerns surround every language act and every manner of constructing a discipline that brings together language, images, persuasion, identity, technologies, and public life. Courses that attend to rhetoric's historic link with ethics provides students with an opportunity to recognize patterns of exclusion that have persistently appeared in the midst of idealistic visions of the power available through rhetorical education. At the same time, an awareness of the intricate interweaving of rhetoric and ethics illustrates rhetoric's potential to promote positive change in the world, and students are often better able to appreciate this possibility by investigating issues within a broad range of historical and cultural contexts.

An historical focus on rhetoric and ethics can help to orient our field and the undergraduate writing major toward a set of concerns that offer valuable coherence and a unified scope without limiting our inquiry to a linear historical narrative. This focus can also connect traditional areas of disciplinary inquiry with rhetorical practices that extend beyond the West and include communities that have not historically had access to formal education in civic oratory. The study of rhetoric and ethics immerses students in disciplinary history without restricting their understanding of the complexity of that history. It supports students in pursuing disparate goals while providing them with opportunities for shared inquiry that support their exploration of those goals. It also opens the path for idealistic visions of rhetoric's power and capacity for supporting the pursuit of justice, even as it tempers those visions with a realistic understanding that rhetorical skill has often been deployed for ends that are not just, rhetorical access has often been restricted rather than expansive, and rhetorical virtue has often been the subject of bitter contest rather than thoughtfully reasoned consensus.

It is vital to make undergraduate students aware that, while rhetoric has historically been viewed as a field of study that fosters skills that help people make arguments that win the day and provide individuals with suitable credentials for success, it has also been conceived and deployed as the vehicle for developing an ethical sensibility and promoting empathetic relationships. Students can gain a new communicative perspective through exploring rhetoric's ethical potential and recognizing challenges that have prevented this promise from being realized across centuries of rhetorical history. Such an exploration productively destabilizes students' established ways of thinking about argument, providing them with more complex and nuanced points of engagement with the communities in which they are situated.



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