The Rhetoric of Teaching and Learning Rhetoric
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The Persuasive Note
During the past several years, the authors, in collaboration with Professor Gustavo Moretto, have been experimenting with various combinations of music, English, philosophy, and speech communication courses. Within a Liberal Arts cluster of courses, we have used a variety of themes to connect our fields in increasingly cross-disciplinary and integrative ways. The fruits of our collaboration culminated in 2008, when we opted for a shared rhetorical approach. Having previously determined that a rhetorical approach had potential pedagogical value in each of our disciplines, we asked ourselves the question: “Can we broaden and deepen students’ understanding of the formal power of rhetoric by making it the theme of our cluster?” Thus was launched The Persuasive Note Liberal Arts cluster – comprising Introduction to Music (HUM101), Public Speaking (HUC106), Composition I (ENG101), The Research Paper (ENG103), and an Integrating Hour (LIB110).

We were acutely aware that rhetoric was not an easy sell: After all, there are many prevalent misconceptions about it, some of them pejorative, such as the notion that it refers to language that is stylistically over-elaborated, over-elevated, bombastic, or pompous.1 By contrast, our students, the majority of whom are freshmen, arrived on the first day of classes with almost no idea or, at best, a very vague notion of rhetoric. Here are three representative responses as to what it meant to them before participating in the cluster:

Before taking the cluster of courses rhetoric to me generally meant nothing. I had no clue as to what it meant. Every time it was mentioned in class I would get all fuzzy as to the meaning of it.

In all honesty and humility, before college, I never heard the word ‘rhetoric’. For the first week of class I heard the same common word, but I was afraid to ask for a definition. [This student would later remark that he one day “realized why a simple definition cannot explain what rhetoric means.”]
Rhetoric is a boring method used only in oratory. Unbelievably, this was my conception of rhetoric before studying it in the persuasive note cluster.

In developing *The Persuasive Note* cluster, we agreed to emphasize those aspects of rhetoric (defined by one student as “a powerful notion of how we get our thoughts and feelings across to others”) that would best help our students in our respective disciplines. Our success was such that, by semester’s end, after the idea of rhetoric was well established for each of our individual disciplines, we began to transcend the applications in our respective courses and to examine interesting inter- and trans-disciplinary connections, borrowings, and cross-fertilizations. Students themselves began to extrapolate rhetorical ideas beyond the disciplines represented in the cluster, an unexpected creative surge facilitated, undoubtedly, by their writing of reflections on rhetoric in general, then in a discipline-specific sense, and, ultimately, in inter- and trans-disciplinary senses extending beyond even our own.

While we used several approaches to elicit critical and creative student reflections, including specific homework assignments and classroom discussions, the primary instrument was a “Reflections” page on all student ePortfolios. The page was meant to provide an opportunity for students to reflect more fully and deeply on our cluster theme in relation to their coursework, education, and lives generally (the many student reflections scattered throughout this article were extracted from these ePortfolio pages). We were, naturally, interested in discovering the depth of their understanding of rhetoric in principle and in practice for each of our disciplines, but even more so in seeing the extent to which we had succeeded in inculcating rhetoric into our cluster in ways which furthered the aims of interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

**Conceiving Rhetoric**

Rhetoric has been a pedagogical tool since antiquity, first in public speaking and soon after in written expression. The relatively modern extrapolation of rhetoric even further into the consideration of such arts as music and painting would itself seem to be a sort of evolutionary “rhetorical device,” a kind of trope in the evolution of the various art forms.²

Why has rhetoric historically found a place in the classroom? First, a fuller understanding of its principles, devices, and strategies has long
been known to help students in any discipline to conceive, plan, and execute their work effectively. In addition, knowing rhetorical devices and structures improves their ability to read, grasp, and critique the discourses of others.

Still, perhaps the greatest value of rhetoric for our students is to clarify what they come to see as the essentials of researching, critically analyzing, and finally creatively using information in their papers, speeches, and other work.3 By the end of the term, many students recognized the value of this aspect of rhetoric:

Through my participation in the cluster I have learned that rhetoric is a useful tool in order to enhance my communication skills. Its figures, appeals, canons, and elements have helped me understand how to structure and deliver a clear and persuasive message. What we write, say, or express has more power if we use rhetorical methods and means in the communication process.

Clear and significant consequences, both creative and receptive, appear to follow upon the acquisition of rhetorical skills. For example, these skills provide audience members in, say, a speech or music class and readers of literary and other discourses with a framework and a lexicon that result in active, confident, and critical participation in interpreting the text at hand. Further, studying rhetoric helps students better “read” their audiences and, thereby, better tailor their discourses to their purposes. Conversely, it can also help them accurately and critically “read” the intended (and, sometimes, unintended) meanings in the discourses of others.

In order to achieve these ends, we were careful about our choice of texts. We decided to begin with an ancient work widely admired for rhetorical features that are both eminently teachable and accessible to our students. As a common reader, we chose Homer’s Iliad, a work that helped our students improve as readers, listeners, and writers. As a result of texts such as this, our students came to understand that rhetoric has an active as well as a receptive role to play in the expressive life. As one student commented:

Whether it is through writing, through music, or through speeches, the art of rhetoric is a rather important factor. It not only helps the “speaker” to communicate their thoughts and ideas, but it also helps the listening audience.
The Rhetorical Perspective

Significantly, Cicero’s fivefold division of rhetoric as invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery has proved particularly useful as a shared strategy in all of our classes. This generalization may at first seem surprising: Since each of Cicero’s categories has traditionally been associated with speaking and only the first three of them with writing, they have rarely been linked to music-making. However, we have discovered an analogous application with musical composition and performance.

It would appear that the very act of reflecting on forms, for example, the canons of rhetoric operating in musical composition, helped some students rather convincingly to find them there. According to one of our students:

While analyzing the musical compositions of Bach, Mozart, and Haydn, I noticed that Cicero’s five canons of rhetoric are present in the process of creating a pleasant and logical musical piece. To illustrate invention, the first canon of rhetoric, [we see it] is present when the composer is looking for an original motive that will be repeated through the whole composition. After this disposition makes an appearance, the composer structures the [elements] to make the piece coherent. Then the composer uses style to ornament the composition while choosing instruments and notes. After this [he] uses memory in order to recall the motives, themes, and notes that will be repeated throughout the composition. Finally, the composer or [some other performer] engages in the delivery, the last canon of rhetoric, where non-verbal and verbal messages in the composition maximize the effectiveness of the message.

We have discovered a similar usefulness in the time-honored stylistic registers of high, middle, and low as well as in Aristotle’s influential modes of discourse development: definition, division/classification, cause/effect, process, and comparison/contrast. These categories provide representative structural (and other) patterns particularly for speech/essay development. Structures such as fugue and symphony provide analogous, although diverse, patterns in music.

Early on, we also introduced our students to Aristotle’s three rhetorical appeals, namely, ethos, dramatization of the speaker through his/her voice; logos, knowledge, information, structure, and purpose of the
discourse; and *pathos*, dramatization of and appeal to the audience as a member of a community of shared feelings, interests, and/or values.\(^5\)

Thus, we demonstrated that rhetoric provides all the techniques of *suasion*, first taken up in consideration of compositional structure, but then developed in myriad ways, as each discipline has its own arsenal of rhetorical devices, offering expressive and effective tropes, figures, analogues, and so forth.

But one might ask: Do students really grasp these complex, interpenetrating notions and begin to apply them? In attempting a necessarily tentative answer to this question, we should look at excerpts from student reflections late in the term on each of the three disciplines in the cluster:

**Music:** Music composers and [performers] intend to create powerful music to persuade the audience to listen and like their compositions . . . This process makes of music an artistic form of communication. Since the purpose is to create unique, logical, powerful, and beautiful music . . . to captivate and influence an audience, rhetoric, the art of persuasion and its elements, plays an important role in this process.

**English:** The rhetoric in English literature, composition and research . . . exemplifies the concept of rhetoric. I believe that without rhetoric teaching and learning about works in English would not make as much sense as it does today. The great works of literature, such as the plays written by Shakespeare and the Greek mythical stories Homer told in the Iliad, are perfect examples of written compositions that people may find best suited to understand the rhetorical modes of English.

**Speech:** [While] rhetoric is used every time we try to express our ideas . . . its use particularly in public speaking is very clear because it shows how Cicero’s five canons of rhetoric – invention, disposition, style, memory and delivery, and Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals – ethos, pathos, and logos, help in structuring and delivering a message . . . The canons and appeals are helping me in the building of a strong case where I can be more persuasive by having valid arguments, an understandable arrangement, an ornamental style, an effective use of memory, and an eloquent delivery.
In addition, students began to make subtle comparisons and contrasts among the various disciplines. For example, in the following brief analysis, the student saw a fundamental difference between English and the other two cluster disciplines:

Rhetoric in English . . . is different from that of music and speech because it is not a presentation. It is not heard by the ear. It is seen by the eye. The structure and style is different. The way that it is received by the person is more personal [in the sense that] you can always go back and look at it again.

The Creative Interplay of Rhetorical Elements
Throughout the semester, we treated rhetoric as a complex, rich, and evolving concept vital for the development of “orators” skilled in diverse arts and sciences, and audiences who are both appreciative and critical of the work produced in various disciplines. Along the way, students deepened their understanding of the multiple ways in which rhetoric informs these disciplines and, indeed, many aspects of their lives through its uses in, for example, journalism, advertising, politics, law, etc. Rhetoric can also be related to ethical considerations such as those involved in developing an informed citizenry.

Eventually, students discovered that producers, consumers, and critics of work may also share methods and “devices,” sometimes borrowing analogous tropes, structures, ways of arguing, etc. The philosopher of aesthetics, Susanne K. Langer, has written that while each art possesses its own dominant “semblance,” what she terms a primary illusion,\(^6\) there are also secondary illusions taken from other arts (for example, “space” or “texture” in music) which function as a kind of “echo,” becoming vital and effective within that borrowing art. She writes, “The primary illusion always determines the ‘substance,’ the real character of an art work, but the possibility of secondary illusions endows it with [a] richness, elasticity, and wide freedom” (118).

A number of students who had become intrigued by these notions managed ultimately to grasp them with considerable subtlety:

Susanne Langer . . . spoke of there being two different types of illusions in art, primary illusions [such as] the colors in painting; and secondary illusions, [such as] ‘color’ in music. The idea of a secondary illusion of art in music goes further than just color. These illusions are what give a piece of music its own musical identity.
Lessons Learned
So, what have we learned, after running the cluster for the first time, about what our students learned? While using various tools to assess the course, our primary assessment instrument, as previously noted, was the ePortfolio “Reflections” page. Student reflections offer informal evidence that our students came to comprehend the meaning, purpose, and value of rhetoric not only in our three disciplines but also across disciplines and, beyond our cluster courses, in other arts, sciences, popular culture, hobbies, the work place, etc.:

One of the things I learned about rhetoric was that it can be applied to almost anything. It turns out that some of my favorite hobbies draw from a rhetorical rule book.

Rhetoric . . . helps [in organizing] a project by steps to construct an essay, paint a painting, write a piece of music, [or develop] a science experiment.

It is interesting to see how rhetoric is not only present in music, composition, and oratory, but also in an exact science like mathematics. Learning about rhetoric in this cluster has made me realize that the formulation and testing of a hypothesis . . . is like the use of a theme, instances, and conclusions in a musical composition; or a thesis statement and supporting details in an essay or speech.

There is still, of course, much work to be done. First of all, we need to inquire into the specific ways that studying rhetoric impacts the quality of student work and the extent to which it does so. For now, we have little doubt that a rhetorical foundation has helped our students design speeches, essays, and formal research papers with greater skill and confidence. In the future, some further assessment can be achieved, in English for example, by evaluating student achievement on the final exam in the light of the initial diagnostic essay. Comparable assessment models can also be applied in speech and music courses.

But that is work for another day. Meanwhile, what could be sweeter music to our ears (or is it to our minds’ eyes?) than to read this student remark: “I love rhetoric and learning about it”? And we love teaching it, too.
Notes

1. Rhetoric has also been thought to be made up of any discourse that chooses persuasion over truth, glibness over integrity, etc. Such an attitude goes back at least as far as Plato, who, saddened over Socrates’s fate, concluded that “legal rhetoric is mostly employed to pervert truth and justice by seeking either to help wrongdoers escape punishment… or to impose legal penalties on the innocent” (Poulakos and Poulakos 14).

2. Even in its earliest stages, rhetoric was not a unitary discipline. George A. Kennedy identifies at least three strands, loosely describable as “technical,” “sophistic,” and “philosophical,” that soon emerged (16–17). According to this prominent expert on rhetorical history, “a secondary rhetoric in arts other than literature” also exists:

   In antiquity the analogy between rhetoric and painting or sculpture was repeatedly noticed, by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian among others, and the analogy to architecture is occasionally mentioned as well. Writers on the arts sometimes borrow terminology from rhetoric. In the Renaissance and later, treatises on music, painting, and other arts were often based on the structure and categories of classical rhetoric. (5–6, emphasis added)

It should also be recalled that Aristotle considered music and “visible performance” to be two of the six parts of tragic form – together with plot, characters, speech, and ideas (Lausberg 518).

3. This benefit of rhetorical education is closely related to important elements of information literacy, defined in 1989 by the American Library Association as the ability “to recognize when information is needed and . . . to locate, evaluate, and use [it] effectively.” This definition forms the basis of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education developed in 2000 by the Association of College and Research Libraries. Of course, much more than “information” is implied when speaking of rhetoric. On the pedagogical pertinence and usefulness of rhetoric for today’s students, see Knoblauch and Brannon’s second and fifth chapters, “Ancient Rhetoric in Modern Classrooms” and “Modern Rhetoric in the Classroom,” respectively.

4. Kennedy offers a helpful introduction to Cicero’s understanding and use of these terms (90–96).

5. For an exhaustive discussion of these three terms and of their practical applicability in modern settings, see Hauser, 90–119.

6. Langer holds that music, for example, expresses a kind of “virtual time” as its primary illusion, the plastic arts express various forms of “virtual space,” and so forth. However, such expressions are mere pointers to extended analyses, sometimes occurring over several chapters.
7. The American philosopher and scientist, Charles S. Peirce, argued that the very methodology of scientific inquiry represented a kind of theoretical rhetoric (Richmond).

**WORKS CONSULTED**


