

Rhetorical Theories and the Teaching of Writing
Graduate Course in English: Emphasis Writing Studies
Professor Bob Whitney

The contradiction-problem at the heart of rhetorical theory, and at the heart of this course:

We speak, write and teach of “rhetoric” or “rhetorical theory” as if it were some universal paradigm encompassing all serious prose discourse: exposition, non-fiction, academic, forensic or inquisitive discourse in writing. Frequently this “rhetoric” is reduced to models of “argument” or “persuasion” defined as offering a “thesis” supported by “evidence.” Sometimes it includes a variety of so-called “rhetorical modes” such as description, comparison and contrast, definition, summary, and so on, often formally prescribed in one way or another, including injunctions such as “stick to the topic” “support your thesis” “use complete sentences,” “be clear” or “be objective and impersonal.” All of this is done in the service, we suppose, of teaching expository, academic or non-fiction writing and is usually done with implicit or explicit claims of universality—that what we are teaching as “rhetoric” is some kind of universal and unquestionable pattern for serious, academic, inquisitive or argumentative discourse.

However, even if we consider only the culturally limited world of Western rhetoric, there is a striking absence or omission from these pedagogical and discursive formulations, namely: dialectic. From its origins in ancient Greece, Western thought on this subject recognized two opposed ideas of expository discourse, one “rhetorical” and the other “dialectical,” and they were not thought of as equals. “Rhetoric” was thought of as a severely limited and deficient form of discourse: useless for seeking truth, having no ethics, good only for certain utilitarian and somewhat disreputable purposes such as arguing in court, political persuasion, propaganda, advertizing, mass indoctrination, demagoguery, conning—discourses aimed at manipulating and exploiting people in various ways. If we wanted to do serious inquiry, search for truth, try to write and speak in ways that would actually increase our knowledge or our goodness as human beings, only dialectic could be trusted because dialectic includes serious opposition and challenge leading to the possibility of complete, transformational—from the ground up—reconsideration, exactly what rhetoric, especially as practiced pedagogically, seems to eliminate.

Rhetoric and dialectic were taught as the two mainstays of the Western curriculum (along with grammar, a somewhat lesser cousin in the “trivium”) throughout the ancient period, through the Middle Ages, and into the Renaissance, and it was during the Renaissance and Enlightenment that “dialectic” was increasingly eclipsed pedagogically in favor of the lesser “rhetoric,” to the point where today dialectic is seldom if ever mentioned in expository writing classes and the singular model of essentially monologic rhetoric (a thesis supported by evidence) is taught, often to the exclusion of all else.

Why? What was this binary discursive tradition all about, and what happened in the modern world such that the idea of “dialectic” (but not grammar-prescriptivism) was eliminated from the curriculum, and our ideas of discourse (and instruction) were reduced to the monologic? And, what effects do these conceptions and misconceptions of writing have on how we (mis)teach writing (and reading?) today—and what we could-would do if we really wanted to develop engaged, life-long, independent learners, inquirers, thinkers, writers and readers?

Primary Course Assignments:

This is a course about how theory and practice can transform each other through dialogical interaction and engagement, what we *do* in this course will be as important as the theories/concepts/history we engage with. Throughout the course you will be expected to involve yourself in a four-part dialogical process of

reading-writing-discussing-practice the purpose of which is to enable you, the learner, to engage with reading and writing (and related practices, like teaching) in much more dialogic ways, and ways which can transform what we actually do as teachers or tutors of writing.

1. Dialectical reading-writing-practice journal (to be kept throughout the course, excerpts handed in weekly). Should include development of your main questions and discussion of your teaching-tutoring practice in interaction with the theoretical perspectives under discussion.
2. A paper written, revised (deeply) throughout the course. An attempt at serious, dialogic, inquisitive, autoethnographic writing and revision on a question of your choosing.
3. Print all this out (the journal, the latest draft of your paper, the texts you're currently working on) and bring them to each class.

Schedule:

Week 1, Course Overview: the dialectic of history and the problematic relationship of theory and practice—how learning to write might be more of a theoretical-social-personal transformation than it is rhetorical skill acquisition. The major disabling misconception: the “control hypothesis” at the heart of Western humanist (mis)understandings of writing instruction (and a lot else)—if we could just *control everything in the right way* the world would be a better place—and the deep, social-personal problematic this major cultural misconception immerses us in if we try to write, read, or teach literacy.

Week 2, History: Asante, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Sophists: Kristeva and Plato’s “chora,” the reduction of discursive dialectic to the Western humanist monologic fantasy of objectivity, critical thinking, logic, and empirical observation.

Week 3, Dialectical Challenge 1: Pratt, Anzaldúa, hooks, Kristeva Cixous, Polanyi: Autoethnography: genotext and *écriture féminine*: Social repression and the discursive transgression against Plato’s personal/political disjunction of “self.”

Week 4, History 2: Ancient rhetoric/dialectic: the political-discursive construction of Western humanist ideology and the cultural-political repression of the transformational-semiotic in the creation of Western humanism.

Week 5, Dialectical Challenge 2: Bakhtin, Adorno, Marx, Althusser, Lacan, Morrison, Emig: reconsideration of Socrates and the emerging dialectical challenges-alternatives to monologic rhetoric—what *writers* have always known.

Week 6, History 3: Medieval rhetoric/dialectic: the construction of the god of reason (Derrida’s “transcendental signified”) and its political-discursive-repressive implications.

Week 7, Dialectical Challenge 3: Neel-Derrida-Plato, Tingle, Lacan, Klein: psychoanalysis and writing as remedy-poison: intellect versus identity and ideological resistance to the fragmentation of “self” necessary for learning, intellectual activity and personal-political growth.

Week 8, History 4: The emergence of modern rhetoric, the discursive repression of dialectic, its reemergence in the theoretical-linguistic-political, and the creation of the ideal-material

ideological binary

Week 9, Dialectical Challenge 4: Cixous, hooks, Marx, Wright: Writing, death, and the repressed continuum of trauma in a society of domination: personal-intellectual-social-political-economic.

Week 10, History 5: How what we call “education” suppresses literacy: The contemporary problematic of writing instruction: classicism-romanticism and the anti-transformational aporia of dialectic.

Week 11, Dialectical Challenge 5: Nietzsche, Kristeva and Plato’s binary: Writing from dialectical uncertainty: Nietzsche’s grammar--what actually *is* this human-linguistic capacity for inquiry?

Week 12, Dialectical Challenge 6: Anzaldúa, Lacan, Žižek, Greene, Freedom Writers: Writing and the discursive repression of awareness of the ongoing holocaust of social injustice we live in: writing and the “ignorance is bliss” problem.

Week 13: Becoming a transformational teacher of literacy.

Week 14: Transformational literacy and the dialectic of transcendence: material personal-social transformationality versus the Western humanist metaphysical-romantic delusion of personal “freedom.”