

## Generating Facility with Primary Texts and Conveying Relevance in the Rhetorical Tradition— Dave Tell

### **Overview**

A communication studies professor focuses on redesigning his survey course to increase students' investment in readings, better integrate students' final paper with course material, and convey the relevance of the rhetorical tradition.

#### *LEVEL 1:*

### **Background**

My course redesign focuses on COMS 232, The Rhetorical Tradition. The course is a survey-style course in which each class meeting spotlights a different thinker. The course is organized both chronologically and thematically. The three primary goals are:

1. Track changes in the art of rhetoric
2. General facility with primary texts
3. Appreciate the contemporary relevance of a very old tradition

### **Implementation & Student Work**

After my baseline offering of the course, I identified three key issues I wanted to resolve:

- First, I was having trouble getting students to read in such a way that they felt invested and confident with the texts upon their arrival in class.
- Second, the final paper in the course was too much of an independent assignment, not integrated with the remainder of the course.
- Third, I have had particular difficulty conveying the contemporary relevance of the rhetorical tradition.

One course change was successful, one was mixed, and one needs further modification.

### **Reflections**

The most serious sticking point in the course still surrounds my third goal, relevance of the tradition. As I move forward, I want to devise a way to challenge my students to think of relevancy in terms of *capacities* rather than *competencies*. Rather than competencies that can be applied, the humanities provides capacities that can be drawn upon. Classically, of course, a capacity of civic engagement, but also capacities for judgment, discrimination, reflexivity, critique, perspective, compassion, cosmopolitanism, and reflection. These, in my view, are not simply relevant, they are critical.

#### *LEVEL 2:*

### **Background**

My course redesign focuses on COMS 232, The Rhetorical Tradition. The course serves two purposes: intellectually, it is an overview to the rhetorical tradition. Institutionally, it is an introduction to the rhetoric track of the Communication Studies major. In terms of design, the course is a survey-style course in which each course meeting spotlights a different thinker in the rhetorical tradition.

In Fall 2015, 12 students were enrolled; 11 of these were COMS majors. This is continued evidence of the sharp drop in enrollments in COMS 232 since the redesign of the COMS major in AY 2014-2015. COMS 232 once enrolled nearly 100 students/semester.

The course is organized both chronologically and thematically:

Section one—Classical Antiquity: Rhetoric as Persuasion

Section two—The Renaissance: Rhetoric as Education

Section three—The Enlightenment: Rhetoric as Communication

Section four—Contemporary Theory: Rhetoric and Power

The course has three primary goals:

1. Track the changes in the art of rhetoric. Rhetoric may be ancient—the first of the liberal arts by some counts—but it has hardly been stable. Indeed, the art of rhetoric has changed so dramatically that is oftentimes difficult to recognize the continuities in the tradition.
2. Generate facility with primary texts. Students read excerpts of various philosophers from ancient times through the present. The readings are not easy, but they should get easier as students grow more comfortable with the tradition.
3. Appreciate the contemporary relevance of a very old tradition. Students and I consistently try to draw connections between the rhetorical tradition and the worlds we live in on a daily basis.

### **Implementation & Student Work**

After my baseline offering of the course (Spring 2015), I identified three key issues I wanted to resolve in year number two. The first two issues relate to goal #2, generating in the students a facility with primary texts.

**First, I was having trouble getting students to read in such a way that they felt invested and confident with the texts upon their arrival in class.**

Students would routinely share a variation of the following sentiment: “I read carefully, but didn’t understand it. When you lecture it makes perfect sense, but I quickly forget what you said.” Historically speaking, I have responded to these frustrations by adding short tests and pop quizzes. This, I figured, would increase accountability and encourage my students to read more carefully. It did not work. In Fall 2015, I tried something new. I eliminated all short tests (but retained three pop quizzes). In their place, I instated a variation of an assignment I was introduced to at a CHRP meeting: Literature Circles.

The specifics of my Literature Circles Assignment are included on my Fall 2015 syllabus. Generally speaking, eight times over the course of the semester, students needed to use prompts of the literature circle roles (word watcher, connector, illuminator, and summarizer) to reflect on the reading ahead of time.

Taken as a whole, the results were promising. Students tended to ask better questions in class, and they tended to be more prepared for discussion than they were under the short test model. Predictably, some students figured out a way to complete the Literature Circles assignment with a minimum amount of effort. I have included student examples (one good, one bad) to illustrate the range of work.

**Second, the final paper in the course was too much of an independent assignment, not integrated with the remainder of the course.**

I changed this assignment in two ways. First, I changed the parameters of the assignment. The assignment once asked students to write about a rhetorical theorist whom we had not covered in class. This, I assumed, would encourage greater research because students would be unable to lean on my lecture. In Fall 2015 I allowed them to write on a figure on the syllabus (i.e., someone about whom I lectured). This both elevated the level of class discussion (because some of the students had done outside research) and better integrated the experience of the paper with the experience of the class.

Second, I scaffolded three smaller assignments into the course paper. I asked students to first complete a Literature Circles writing assignment about the person they intended to research. I then asked students to create an annotated bibliography of four secondary sources. Finally, I asked students to write a one-page review of one of their sources.

The results were mixed. On the one hand, students who took the scaffolded prompts seriously wrote much better papers. On the other hand, with only one exception, students did not use my feedback on early assignments to modify their work on larger assignments. The people who did poorly on the earliest assignment tended to do poorly on the larger assignments. There was one exception, a student who wrote a very poor annotated bibliography but, based on my feedback, was able to change course and write a much stronger final paper.

**Third, I have had particular difficulty conveying the contemporary relevance of the rhetorical tradition.**

I am at my wits end on this question, although I remain committed to finding a resolution.

In Spring 2015, I tried putting my students into groups of two or three and asking them to compose a skit which demonstrated the contemporary relevance of the rhetorical tradition. One student was to impersonate a character from the syllabus (say, Aristotle, Rousseau, or Nietzsche) and another was to be a modern-day student. They were to stage an interaction in which the character from the rhetorical tradition would meet a need of a modern-day student. The skits were funny, but not effective (more on that below).

In Fall 2015, I tried another assignment I first learned of in the CTE, a slideshow assignment. I asked my students to create a Power Point slideshow designed to give practical reasons why a high-school senior should study rhetoric in college (see rubric for this assignment here). These were not as funny as the skits. And there were not very effective. I've included an example (Student A slideshow).

Both assignments failed (in my opinion) for the same reason. When faced with the question of relevance, students defaulted to identifying particular *competencies* or *skills* learned from the rhetorical tradition that can then be transferred to different situations. They treat the classroom as sort of practice for real life.

## Reflections

I have come to the conclusion that a *competency-based model* of relevancy is not very good for the humanities. Students tend to find particular things that, say, Aristotle said and then apply the saying, verbatim, to a 21C situation. The problem is not, precisely, that students don't think about the relevancy of material. The greater problem is that they think of relevancy only through the category of specific class-practiced, world-applied *competencies*.

As I move forward, I want to devise a way to challenge my students to think of relevancy in terms of *capacities* rather than *competencies* (these are my own terms, totally arbitrary). By *capacities*, I mean a readiness to engage situations in which learned skills are not necessarily applicable. Here I'm working from the conviction that the humanities does not offer much in the way of specific skills. Learning how Aristotle taught his students to give speeches is fine, but it is not a competency that will ever be all that useful (for most people).

Rather than competencies that can be applied, the humanities provides capacities that can be drawn on. Classically, of course, a capacity of civic engagement, but also capacities for judgment, discrimination, reflexivity, critique, perspective, compassion, cosmopolitanism, and reflection. These, in my view, are not simply relevant, they are critical!

Moving forward, I need to come up with assignments/exercises that help students reframe the question of relevance in terms of capacities. Other continuing issues:

1. I still need to do better with rubrics. I used a rubric for my slideshow assignment, but I didn't use it in a way that was particularly helpful to students. I didn't include sample assignments that demonstrated how the rubric would be used.
2. COMS 232 has been (re)approved for the KU Core. I need to devise assignments to assess the learning outcomes of the KU Core Goal 3.