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Facilitating Collegiate Literacy: Introducing Students to Rhetorical Awareness Utilizing College-Related Texts in the Composition Classroom

Topic:

This presentation is related to both “changing student populations” and “changing institutions” as it addresses a way for faculty to take an active role in facilitating student success related to students’ knowledge of institutional discourses. This presentation takes into account the large numbers of first-generation and non-traditional students—who may not have the same institutional familiarity as more traditional students—which current two-year institutions are serving and the current context wherein traditional academic support/services staff may not be available to provide the needed level of on-going support as a result of increased enrollment, budget cuts, etc.

Overview:

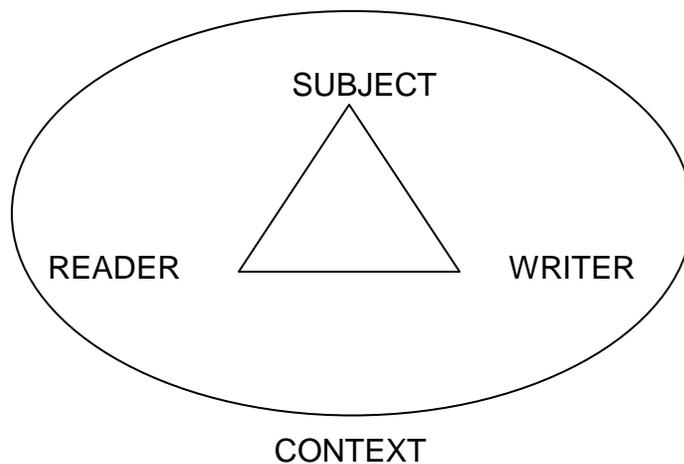
Many two-year students are new to the “discourse community” of higher education and may not have frames of reference for interpreting the plethora of documents and information—texts “insiders” may take for granted such as syllabi, rubrics, course catalogs, plans of study, the FAFSA—related to attending college. Successfully leveraging information from these texts requires students to quickly acquire new vocabulary, categories and expectations for information, understandings of document structures, and other key rhetorical insights, genre awareness and literacy skills.

Since rhetorical awareness and the abilities to recognize and respond to genre expectations are key to composition instruction, this presentation proposes using college-related texts as subjects of study in Writing/English 101 in order to develop students’ collegiate literacy skills. Analyzing college-related texts serves to provide visible relevancy to the acquisition of rhetorical skills and contributes to students’ overall success by empowering them with strategies for reading, analyzing and responding to documents related to their continuing participation in higher education.

RHETORICAL SITUATION

Scholar Cathy McDonald explains that, “A *rhetorical situation* is a need or urgency that can be resolved by communication” (“Genres: Shapes of Meaning”).

If *rhetoric* describes the choices writers make to influence their readers (Greene and Lidinsky, 2012), then a *rhetorical situation* is a situation which requires thinking about and making such choices. This actually happens, somewhat subconsciously, every time we communicate, but we can also identify specific situations where we become aware of and deliberate about the choices we make in order to achieve successful and effective communication. For instance, getting a writing assignment in school is an example of a *rhetorical situation* which requires conscious *rhetorical* choices in order to achieve success (convince your readers and get a good grade).



Analyzing *rhetorical situations* so that we can make effective choices always involves thinking about the relationships between the *reader*, *writer*, and *subject*, as well as recognizing how the *context* (time and location) will influence the communication.

For example, some questions we might ask would be:

- **How controversial, timely, or well-known is the SUBJECT?**
(Will readers recognize it as significant or important? Is it technical or obscure in nature? Are its connections to other issues obvious or do they need to be explained?)
- **How invested in, and opinionated and knowledgeable about the subject are the READERS?**
(Will they be open to new ideas? Are they likely to object to certain claims?)
- **How invested in, and opinionated and knowledgeable about the subject is the WRITER?**
(Will s/he have to overcome her/his own bias to present a balanced perspective? Will s/he have to do research to find out more about the subject? Is s/he a well-known expert in the field, or will s/he have to convince the readers of her/his expertise?)
- **Where, when, and how is the communication happening (CONTEXT)?**

(Is it a formal or personal setting? Can visuals be used, or do examples need to be described? What kinds of evidence or examples are expected? Will readers/listeners be expecting the subject or do they need to be drawn in? How long will their attention hold?)

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

Performing a *rhetorical analysis* involves asking questions like those on the first page. It can happen before communicating—to figure out what choices to make—or after a communication is complete—to examine what choices were made and how effective they were in that situation.

The answers to such questions influence choices about such writing concerns as:

- What genre and/or medium should I use?
- What kinds of language should I choose or avoid?
- What kind of tone should I use or avoid?
- How should I organize or structure the information?
- What kinds of examples or evidence should I use or avoid?
- How long should it be?
- Do I have to do any extra work to establish my expertise or credibility?
- Do I have to do any extra work to overcome readers' objections or assumptions?

One way to organize your thoughts when conducting a *rhetorical analysis* is to group them under four (4) categories:

- The SITUATION / CONTEXT:
- The PURPOSE:
- The THESIS and SUPPORTING CLAIMS:
- The AUDIENCE:

I also think it is helpful (especially as we think about our own writing) to examine factors which might limit our ability to do exactly what we want in certain *rhetorical situations*. These limitations can be grouped under:

- The CONSTRAINTS:

BY COMPLETING THIS SURVEY, I AM GIVING MY CONSENT FOR YOU TO SHARE THIS DATA WITH OTHER FACULTY, ADMINISTRATORS, AND RESEARCHERS.

.....
1. Do you find it easier to read documents online or via a physical text?

Online				Physical	
x	x	x	x	x	x

.....
2. Do you know where you could find a course description for a class you were considering taking?

No Yes

3. Do you think reading a course description could help you decide whether or not to take the class?

No Yes

Why? _____

4. Do you know what a course description is?

No Yes

5. Do you know what a course catalog is?

No Yes

6. Do you know what information is usually included in a course catalog?

No					Yes
0	1	2	3	4	5

7. Do you know where you can find a course catalog?

No Yes