

Goodburn, Spring 1999
976 Rhetorical Theory: Rhetoric and Representation
Number of Students: 10
Number of Evaluations: 9

COMMENTARY

Aims and Goals

I designed this rhetorical theory course to accomplish two things: 1) to introduce students to classical rhetorical texts and the lines of inquiry that they take up and 2) to help students see connections between this inquiry and contemporary debates within English Studies regarding rhetoric, representation, and identity. Some of the questions we investigated included the following: How has rhetoric been historically figured in relation to ethical action? What is the relationship between language and reality? What are the ethics involved in representing oneself or one's community? And how can classical rhetoric inform our understandings of contemporary debates about representation and identity?

In organizing the syllabus, I felt a tension between providing a course in historical rhetoric—giving students a sense of the important questions or lines of inquiry normally associated with the study of the rhetorical tradition—and examining more contemporary autobiographical and ethnographic texts which raise issues of representation, identity, and genre that most of the students were interested in pursuing. My main concern was that I would give short shrift to the rhetorical canon, particularly because we focused only on the classical tradition with a few twentieth century rhetoricians. While I didn't envision this course as a canonical march through the rhetorical tradition, I knew that for most students, this course would be their only experience with rhetorical theory. Thus, I felt the typical pull between the "coverage model" and a more experimental approach. Ultimately, I chose to move back and forth between classical rhetorical texts and contemporary theorists whose works, while not located within the rhetorical tradition, embody and raise issues about identity, representation, and genre that the course sought to examine. In particular, I chose several ethnographic texts, both within and outside of English Studies, because ethnographers are so heavily immersed in debates about representation and identity. I also chose contemporary texts that blurred genre definitions because so many of the students were interested in issues of "the personal" in academic discourse and the writing of "creative nonfiction." A final factor influencing my organization of the syllabus was the fact that several scholars whose works were connected to the topic of rhetoric and identity were scheduled to visit campus during this semester: Anne Ruggles Gere, Ruth Behar, and Judith Ortiz Cofer. I assigned texts from these scholars and incorporated their talks into the framework of the course.

In the syllabus, I described my vision of a seminar as a place where people come prepared to share ideas, raise questions, learn from and build on others' contributions, revise previous ways of thinking, propose tentative conclusions, and apply concepts and theories to their own experiences. In keeping with these goals, students were asked to write six response papers (3–4 pages), one discussion-starter paper, a draft of a final project for peer response, and a formal presentation. I created the discussion-starter paper as a way for each student to

be held responsible for generating a class discussion without feeling that s/he had to give a formal presentation to the class. In the past, I have asked students to lead discussions but these sessions have turned into “talking-head” presentations with little time for class interaction. Each class period began with one student distributing a discussion-starter paper of two pages. The class spent the first ten minutes reading it and responding to it in writing. Then we used the students’ responses to generate the discussion about the material for the following hour. The second hour was spent either in small groups or in discussing questions and issues that I provided which weren’t previously discussed.

Successful Features

The discussion-starter papers were one of the most successful features of this course. Students frequently said that they appreciated this component because it allowed students to determine how the class texts would be discussed in class and provided opportunities for other students to see how peers were making sense of the texts. Students also said that they appreciated being able to read other peers’ work in the course through these papers, and they enjoyed receiving feedback from others on the days that they led the discussion.

The second successful feature of the course was the final project, which allowed students flexibility to pursue projects beyond the traditional 20-page critical evaluative seminar paper. Several students said that they appreciated not being forced to write a seminar paper from the position of authority when they were still exploring ideas in process. I think this was particularly important because very few of the students had read classical rhetorical texts beforehand so much of the semester was spent developing a vocabulary for talking and writing about rhetoric and getting a sense of what the main lines of inquiry are in the rhetorical tradition. I tried to encourage students to use the final project as a space to review their own ideas and study the process of their thinking about rhetoric throughout the semester. For instance, one student used his response journals as primary texts in which he traced the development of his thinking regarding connections between critical theory (his area of specialization) and rhetorical theory. Several students theorized writing that they were producing in other classes, particularly texts that they were writing simultaneously for Barbara DiBernard’s Creative Nonfiction class (over half of the class was taking this course as well). One student did an extended rhetorical analysis of a nineteenth-century graduation speech from a woman’s academy and compared it with the valedictory speech that she had given a century later. Another examined the rhetoric of the American Disabilities Act, which at the time was being challenged at the Supreme Court Level. And still another analyzed her experiences tutoring a “gifted” student in a local elementary school by examining the rhetoric of the gifted movement within this institution and reflecting upon her own school experiences in being labeled “gifted.” While this range of projects was somewhat challenging for me to respond to and evaluate, I think it was especially useful for students in that they all seemed to pursue projects in which they were genuinely interested and which connected to their wide-ranging interests and abilities.

Another feature of the course, which I felt was successful was the incorporation of students’ final projects as texts to be read and responded to by other students. During the last two weeks of the semester, students placed drafts of their projects on reserve at the library, where they were read and responded to by other class members. In the past I have organized peer response sessions in graduate seminars but students have not seemed to value them, in

part I think because the assigned published texts were still considered the primary texts in the course. By emphasizing the students' writing as the assigned reading for those particular class days, I hoped to signal to students that their projects were valuable contributions to class knowledge-making. Each student was required to respond in writing to two other students' projects each week. In addition to validating the worth of individual students' projects, these peer response sessions allowed students to see the wide variety of approaches one can take to rhetorical theory and the ways that it can be incorporated into the work of English Studies in general. I felt that this awareness was especially important to foster because very few of the students enrolled were specializing in rhetoric or composition and this is probably the only course that most will ever take in the subject.

Finally, I think one of the most important elements in this course was the students' general enthusiasm and respect for each others' ideas and positions. Although I can claim little credit for it, students in this seminar were genuinely interested in and respectful toward one another in ways that I have rarely experienced in the teaching of graduate seminars. There was very little sense of competition or one-upmanship that frequently surfaces in such seminars. While the course arrangement may have facilitated this attitude in some small way, in general the students were responsible for creating a very positive climate for learning throughout the semester. Even when students were in disagreement with each other's ideas, they worked through these disagreements in thoughtful and respectful ways.

Areas for Improvement

Overall I was fairly pleased with how this course unfolded in terms of the lines of inquiry we pursued and the level of discussions in which we engaged. One issue with which I continually struggle is the extent to which I need to provide background context for students' learning, particularly in graduate seminars where MA and Ph.D. students are enrolled. From the onset, I worried that I might need to provide more background lectures, particularly in terms of how to read texts from the rhetorical tradition. In the beginning I did provide handouts such as timelines, strategies and tips for reading, and discussion questions. What I hadn't considered, however, was the extent to which students were (or were not) conversant in critical theory about the relationships between language and reality. Most of the readings on the syllabus, particularly the contemporary texts such as Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* or Ruth Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer*, assume a theoretical understanding of language as constitutive of reality rather than a record of it (indeed, most contemporary rhetorical texts assume this *a priori*). For many students, this understanding of language was quite new (and not surprisingly, somewhat threatening). So at times it was challenging to lead discussions about questions that the assigned texts raised without speaking at cross-purposes. There were several class discussions in which students and I were seemingly conversing in parallel planes, not connecting with one another or with the texts. On these occasions I frequently had to "backtrack," highlighting how the nature of our disagreements stemmed not from our misunderstandings of the texts but from the different assumptions about language, knowledge, and reality that we brought to the table. While these moments were especially challenging for me as a teacher, they were also valuable because they forced me to articulate more clearly the assumptions that I was bringing to the class and the decisions that I had made in organizing the syllabus to begin with. In future

teaching, though, I think I will try to make these assumptions and choices more visible from the onset so that they can be addressed more directly and productively.

RESPONSES TO STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS

In general, I was surprised by how positive the students' evaluations were. The population of the class was so diverse that I sometimes felt that some students weren't being challenged enough while others were feeling lost because they didn't have the theoretical background that much of the readings assumed. But most of the students wrote that the class was well planned and provided them with a good foundation in rhetorical theory. While one student suggested that more background lectures about the rhetoricians would have been useful, another wrote that I "did a great job of putting rhetorical theory in an historical and theoretical context." Several wrote that I managed to keep the discussions focused while allowing them to connect ideas to their own experiences. One wrote that I am helpful at explaining difficult concepts and two others commented on my "energetic and thought-provoking responses" within discussions and to their writing. One wrote that I managed the class (and the enthusiasm of some students) quite well. The comment that I most value is "Amy allows students to form their own opinions, work through problem areas, or difficult theoretical and ethical dilemmas without imposing her own views." As I discussed above, there were several moments during the semester when I felt frustrated with the train of discussions, particularly as students needed to work out difficult theoretical concepts that they had not previously considered. I'm glad that this student felt that I was not too overbearing in terms of the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that I brought to the course.

In terms of their learning, students commented most on how the course encouraged them to think about their own writing processes and the genres in which they write (not surprising since I consciously set out to make space for this type of work in the syllabus). Still, I'm pleased with this response because it suggests that the course allowed students to connect to their research interests and provided them flexibility in the writing projects that they pursued.

I was a little disappointed that only one person remarked on the peer response sessions that I built into the end of the semester since I considered it an important feature of the course. Only one person remarked on the peer response sessions (although she did describe it as a positive experience that helped her to avoid procrastinating). Overall, I'm very pleased by the students' responses to this course. While I was initially concerned that the course would not provide them enough foundation in classical rhetoric, I think their responses suggest that the course enabled them to incorporate insights from the rhetorical tradition into their own thinking and learning in ways that might be ultimately more productive and long lasting.