

## Ethics, the Basic Writer, and Classical Rhetoric

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In "Basic Writing," her important bibliographical essay, Mina Shaughnessy first characterized two prominent qualities that came to be associated with basic writers:

First, they tend to produce, whether in impromptu or home assignments, small numbers of words with large numbers of errors . . . Second, they seem to be restricted as writers, but not necessarily as speakers, to a very narrow range of syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical options, which forces them into either a rudimentary style of discourse that belies their real maturity or a dense and tangled prose with which neither they nor their readers can cope (139).

Scholarship since this essay appeared in 1976 has shifted direction somewhat and added a third characteristic concerning the cognitive, psychological, and moral levels of development of these writers. Cognitively, the students have difficulty conceptualizing and generalizing, practicing synthesis and analysis. Because they are unaware of their own thought processes, they cannot infer general principles based upon the experiences of others. Andrea Lunsford, in her essay, "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," indicates that, when given a series of comic strips dealing with one character, basic writers could not infer the values of the character, especially if those values were dissimilar from their own (38-39). In Lev Vygotsky's terms, the students are at the "thinking in complexes" stage, a middle level of cognitive development, below the true-concept formation stage (Lunsford 39). In addition, the students have difficulty decentering, considering an audience other than themselves or considering an issue in other than immediately personal terms. This difficulty with decentering produces the writer-based prose Linda Flower has described in which the students write for themselves, not providing the framework and transitions necessary for the audience to follow their interior thought processes (19-37). This inability to decenter also results in their primarily personal responses to theoretical issues such as abortion, unemployment, and crime prevention. Basic writers usually see such issues in terms of their immediate impact upon their own lives, rarely considering the more abstract questions such as individual rights and freedom. In Piagetian terms, students are in the concrete operational stage of development, characterized by a strong degree of egocentricity (Lunsford 39).

Psychologically, basic writers often have a low self-concept. Marie Jean Lederman, in research at CUNY, asked basic writers to say how they'd like to be reincarnated; in contrast to the responses of the more-advanced writers also included in the research, the basic writers usually chose a smaller than human animal that was fairly helpless (686). Research by Lunsford corroborates Lederman's observation. Basic writing students' responses to a question about advertising revealed that they viewed themselves as without control, victimized by advertising. On the question of capital punishment, 71% of basic writers favored capital punishment (while 73% of skilled writers opposed it) because many basic writers felt the need for protection (280-81). Lunsford indicates that basic writers often see themselves as victims, helpless and isolated, not as actors, pow-

erful and connected (280-81). In addition, as Lynn Troyka has indicated, basic writers expect to fail in the academic world, and they experience anxiety about their performance, an anxiety which stands in the way of the very learning they need to do (193-94).

Morally, such students seem to be at the conventional level, the middle level of the developmental sequence established by Lawrence Kohlberg. This level is characterized by a profound respect for law and order, for the established order, both within the family structure and within society (Miller). The problems confronting basic writers, then, and those who teach them, are part of the very matrix from which the students work.

What does rhetoric have to offer such students who, despite these problems, write prose that is, as Maxine Hairston noted, "more vital, more engaging and more true to the students' experiences than the impersonal, strangely disengaged prose often produced by . . . more skilled writers?" (Lunsford 287). According to Lunsford and Troyka, rhetoric offers both a method and specific exercises. The Aristotelian method as described by Lunsford and the classical exercises detailed in Edward Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* help basic writers to learn to reason inductively and to make generalizations based upon their inferences from given data (Lunsford "Aristotelian Rhetoric" 2-12). In addition, as Troyka notes, exercises from classical rhetoric engage the students in the learning process so that they succeed and thereby diminish some of their anxiety about their own performance (193-194). Classical rhetoric can also help the students gain a sense of audience, helping them decenter so that they can conceive of an audience other than themselves that they must persuade. Finally, classical rhetoric offers the students subject matter as well as method. Specifically, it offers the students the basic ethical issues and concerns long associated with rhetoric, subject matter that is personally relevant and engaging and that necessitates their consideration of more general questions and divergent audiences.

Rhetoric and ethics, from the days of Isocrates and Plato, have been closely intertwined. Ethical concerns were foremost for rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian as well as Isocrates, and all three were concerned with incorporating ethical issues in the rhetorical instruction of youth. Such instruction prepared the boys for their roles in the government, helping them define basic values, analyze an issue, assess their audience, organize their information, assume an ethos. In addition, it no doubt helped them see themselves as actors in the world around them and ahead of them. Since the classical period, ethical concerns have continued to be at the heart of liberal education. The strength of this historical intertwining of ethics and rhetoric lies in the centrality of both ethics and language in defining what it means to be human. Both involve the growth of self-consciousness, the definition of the self as decision maker whose decisions affect the lives of both self and other, the recognition that each person must define the world and values anew. Because this ethical-rhetorical enterprise is so absorbing and because it involves all three areas — cognitive, psychological, and moral — in which basic writers need to develop, such instruction offers a way of engaging the students and fostering their multi-dimensional growth. Finally, because students use writing to help explore these values and issues, they come to see how language shapes their perceptions, providing impetus for them to become better writers.

How can ethical concerns and rhetorical tools be presented in basic writing instruction to promote growth in these three critical areas? First, the presentation of the assignments can foster

the kind of inductive reasoning with which basic writers seem to have difficulty while raising issues that will arouse the students' interest. In her essay, "Aristotelian Rhetoric: Let's Get Back to the Classics," Lunsford proposes the use of the Aristotelian method of close observation, classification, analysis, and generalization (11). She suggests that students be given data from which they are to work together to infer general principles. To promote consideration of ethical issues, various moral dilemmas and different resolutions can be presented, with the students being asked to infer, first collectively and then individually, what the underlying principles were in each case. Such an approach would have the additional advantage of helping the students see that there are various answers to ethical issues, answers that rest on sound principles and that may differ from their own answers. In addition, it would encourage self-consciousness. To further this growth in self-consciousness and simultaneously encourage the students to decenter, to consider an audience other than themselves that they must persuade, students could be presented with an ethical dilemma to which they are to write two responses. In the first paper, they can be asked to state their responses to the dilemma and the reasons for those responses, the values from which their responses stem. Then they could be asked to write a second paper in which they explain their position to someone who doesn't share their views. In evaluating the papers, the teacher can focus on one skill for each paper: for the first, how well the students were able to infer the general values (principles) that guided their decisions; for the second, what strategies and word choices they employed to persuade their assumed audience. Class discussion of the latter paper can center around the various rhetorical strategies involved in creating a response for an audience unlike themselves.

In the same article Lunsford indicates other tools from classical rhetoric that help the students decenter: the classical exercises of *controversiae* and *prosopopoeia* (10-11). These techniques can easily be adapted for students considering ethical issues. In the classical *controversiae*, students were asked to argue both sides of a well-known issue, although the issues they were given were of a more frivolous nature. In its modern, ethical application, the students could be asked to gather information about a specific ethical issue. William K. Frankena has indicated that one of the primary lessons to learn about ethical decision-making is the need for information, a need which this exercise would emphasize and illustrate. This information gathering should be guided and should include library resources as well as interviews with people who speak with some authority on the issue. Then the students can be asked to argue both sides of the issue, again being asked to infer the general principles or values that inform their respective stances. Throughout the writing of the two papers the students should be working with their classmates, discussing the issue and their work, helping each other find the best rhetorical devices to persuade the audience. The discussion and the exercise itself would help the students see that common principles may generate quite different conclusions, depending on the definition of the problem and the ranking of ethical priorities. In addition, it should illustrate how information can help change their opinions about an ethical issue, thus indicating first hand the importance of information in making a sound ethical decision. Finally, the exercise would encourage the students to see themselves as decision makers, people who can analyze information, synthesize their own personal responses, and articulate those responses in writing — all skills essential in the academic world.

Lunsford's work with *prosopopoeia* could be similarly adapted for use with ethical issues, again helping students to decenter. In the classical exercise, as Lunsford writes, students were asked to, "assume the voice of a famous person and compose what that figure might have said in a given set of circumstances" ("Aristotelian Rhetoric" 11). Modern students could be asked to consider an ethical issue, first speaking for a public figure about whom information was available, then speaking for a close friend or parent. Again, inference gathering would be stressed. From the public figure's actions and statements, what principles can be inferred that would generate that specific response to the ethical issue? What values guide their friends' or parents' responses? What actions and statements reveal those values? *Prosopopoeia* could also be used in conjunction with literature. Since reading and writing are now being integrated in basic writing instruction, an approach advocated by Anthony Petrosky and Donald Bartholomae among others, the students could be asked to infer the general principles that lay beneath an ethical decision reached by a literary character in a novel or work that they were reading. They then could be asked to articulate that character's response in language that was appropriate to the character's *ethos*. An example would be to use a passage from a work such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, perhaps the passage in which sixteen-year-old Maya decides to carry to term her baby, conceived out of wedlock, and to tell no one of her decision until she is too far along for her decision to be altered. In addition, Angelou decides to rear the baby herself, not to offer it up for adoption. The students could be asked to articulate, in Maya's voice, her reasons for not having an abortion and her decision to keep her baby. The process of analyzing Maya's character and her actions in the work would allow students to see that seemingly minor decisions, in this case Maya's decision to have sex without knowing enough to take precautions to prevent pregnancy, can have serious effects. It would also allow them to see that her initial passivity in deciding to keep the baby was, in fact, a choice, one that affected her subsequent life. Since basic writers often see themselves as victims, passive not active individuals, examples like this can help them discover that inactivity is still a type of ethical decision, a type that has significant and long-range effects.

After they complete this exercise in *prosopopoeia*, they could be asked to imagine themselves in such a situation — pregnant and alone — and describe their own ethical decisions and the principles that animated them. Again, such an exercise requires them to analyze their responses, inferring the values that lie beneath those responses, and to articulate that response in writing. In addition, they are asked to think of themselves as decision-makers whose decisions have long-range effects, a realization that should contribute to the growth of self-consciousness they need.

Basic writers' need for such self-consciousness is apparent in work done by Andrea Lunsford and Susan Miller. Miller's analysis of essays written by basic writers in response to a universal question of value shows that they were within the conventional stage, the middle stage, of Kohlberg's levels of cognitive/moral development. She defined the basic writers' responses as marked by adherence to law and authority as opposed to personal needs (124). Miller indicates that the patterns of growth toward rhetorical maturity and toward post-conventional processes are similar. She writes,

. . . the movement from ego-centric, to explanatory, to persuasive discourse is indeed a movement from the writer's assumption of union with an audience to the writer's

recognition of another as an audience, and finally to the writer's analysis of a distant, unfamiliar, universalized series of values as an audience. Kohlberg's work . . . outlines the progress of valuing, the development of the Aristotelian *ethos* toward trustworthy, creditable, and authoritative persuasive content (124).

In addition, Miller cites Kohlberg's observation that students could understand a stage one level above their own, but not two. Thus, she suggests the need for sequenced instruction that allows for a recursive movement as students master different aspects of complex rhetorical skills (125). The ethically-oriented assignments in which students write two papers on one topic, concentrating on different skills in each paper, would help move students toward the rhetorical skills and the cognitive/moral levels that complex academic writing demands.

The introduction of ethical issues, the emphasis on the need for information in making decisions, the requirement that students listen to others' points of view in class discussions, the effort to adopt others' points of view in exercises like the *controversiae* and the *prosopopoeia*, and the insistence that students examine decisions, analyzing them for the values that lie beneath them — all these exercises encourage the students to assume an approach to moral issues that recognizes their complexity and difficulty as well as the inevitability of making ethical decisions. In addition, having the students articulate their own positions and examine these positions for the values upon which they rest fosters the concept of themselves as decision makers, as actors in their worlds, not passive victims.

Classical rhetoric, then, has much to offer basic writing students. Characterized not only by increased grammatical problems and reduced syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical options but also by a greater need for growth in the cognitive, psychological, moral areas of development, basic writing students can benefit from the methods and intertwined rhetorical/ethical emphasis found in classical rhetoric. The methods and emphasis foster the kinds of growth these students need and engage them in the learning process in ways that, as Lynn Troyka says, ". . . revive their confidence in their natural powers to learn" (194).

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## SOME OF WHAT I LEARNED AT A RHETORIC CONFERENCE

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Now that I think about it, the title above is a little presumptuous and maybe secretive. It suggests that I learned a bunch, but am only going to tell about a little. No matter, perhaps: the thing is slight, non-substantive, as they say, and non-empirical, just so all present can know early.

In July, 1985, I went to the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition in State College, Pennsylvania, or University Park, Pennsylvania, but anyway a lovely spot, and a delightful conference. I learned a lot. Some of it I learned in the Sly Fox Lounge in the Sheraton State College under the accidental instruction of a young bartender named John, called Doctor John by some student-aged customers.

My attendance in his class, I'll hurry to add, was infrequent. I didn't go to the Sly Fox Lounge *instead* of attending sessions and hearing papers; I did feel it was acceptable to give local merchants my custom *after* I had done what I was supposed to do.

At any rate, on Wednesday evening, I chanced by the lounge, went in, and sat down around the curve of the bar toward the far end. The place was crowded; the entertainment — a fine act by Ernie Fields and a small band — was entertaining. I was sitting across the bar from John's principal work station. Orders were many and fast. His pace was constant, rapid, and demanding. He produced a surprising quantity, and the quality was apparently acceptable, too, for I saw no drinks returned and none thrown at him.

Then, early on and just one glass of wine into the evening, I saw something happen. Watching him, I began to see punctuation marks in his work — a slice of lemon here, a squirt of lime there, an extra splash yonder, two onions and an extra olive down the way, a flourish over a drink, a pause to make a drink ahead of the order from a man who was apparently a regular customer. I began to see that he was rapidly creating schemes of conveniences as he worked. Two waiters came to their work place near him, and each turned in an order, one for three drinks, given serially, the other for four drinks, given serially. With no discernible pause, he took the order for three and the order for four and converted them into a set of seven with repetitions and parallelisms grouped, followed by individual units. That is to say, as he began making the drinks, he had already in his mind taken one drink from the first order and the identical drink from the second order and grouped them as a start, a repeated rhythm to commence with; he had already in his mind taken a total of three drinks from the two orders that used the same whiskey but with different added ingredients for a little parallel triad with a version of incremental repetition. The two remaining drinks were different; he finished off with them, two closing dependent clauses. While I sat there, he continued to do the same kind of thing, with no noticeable pause in the pace of his work.

He was composing. I realized only then that what he was composing was not the drinks he made and dispensed. The indi-