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Course Description

English 283: Rhetorical Theory and Applications is described in the undergraduate catalogue as offering a “critical and analytical examination of the nature and historical development of rhetorical theory and its applications to contemporary discourse.” The course fulfills requirements for the major in English but is especially important for two concentrations in the major: Rhetorical Studies and English Education. While completing the first-year composition course is not a prerequisite for ENG 283, students enrolled are typically in their junior or senior years.

Depending on the professor and the semester, the course works through different approaches to rhetoric and can focus on different themes. At times, the course is a traditional survey of rhetorical theory; other times the course focuses on modern rhetorical situations. Previous courses have focused on the rhetoric of work, the rhetoric of fear, and rhetorics of disability. The course presented below focused on rhetorical theory, the mass media, and public discourse.

Institutional Context

Illinois State University is located in the twin-city community of Bloomington-Normal. Almost all of the approximately 18,000 undergraduate students are from Illinois and live in the suburbs of Chicago (about two hours from campus), are of traditional college age (average undergraduate age is 21), and visit home frequently. Despite the university’s commitment to diversity and numerous programs in place designed to diversify both the student and faculty populations, student enrollment remains overwhelmingly white (with only about 3,000 non-white students) and middle class.

The English Department at ISU is designed along the English Studies model, an integrative, meta-disciplinary approach. Undergraduate majors can follow three sequences: English, English Education, or Publishing. Minors can be completed in English, English Education, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and Writing. In addition, the department
participates in four campus-wide Interdisciplinary Minors: Comparative Literature, African-American Studies, Children’s Studies, and Women’s Studies. Most of the students enrolled in ENG 283 were English majors, the majority of whom were specializing in English Education.

When the course was proposed in 1995, its main goal was to offer a careful introduction to modes of reasoning and analysis that encourage an interdisciplinary disposition toward knowledge. This goal was reflected in the general education curriculum at ISU as well. When the students in my ENG 283 were in their first year, ISU’s first-year experience program consisted of three core courses: Language and Composition (ENG 101), Language and Communication (COM 110), and Foundations of Inquiry (IDS 100). ENG 101 and COM 110 taught composing as a process and developed rhetorical and analytical skills, one geared toward written and the other oral communication. IDS 100, according to the undergraduate catalog, involved “students in a systematic investigation of the nature, methods, and purposes of knowing and how it is manifested in different disciplinary and cultural contexts. The course offers an introduction to intellectual inquiry and provides a foundation of skills, knowledge, and attitudes for the entire undergraduate curriculum.” One college-level administrator noted that some faculty viewed IDS 100 as an introduction to college-level reading; others as the 101 for the philosophy department; still others as the history of thought. These differing (and often conflicting) expectations for the course, as well as more material concerns of staffing and funding, led to the course being removed from the general education curriculum in 2005; the goals for the course were then folded into the other first-year experience courses.

Students in ENG 283 compared much of the rhetoric instruction of the course to the “logical fallacies” instruction they received in Foundations of Inquiry but claimed that the earlier course had never put the concepts into any context; in contrast, ENG 283’s focus on the mass media and public discourse allowed students to understand how the rhetorical concepts they were learning worked in their academic and personal communication.

Campus events enhanced this social and political context. While some universities were moving toward depoliticizing education and avoiding intellectual debate on campus, ISU actively worked to advance civic education and engagement on campus. Various departments and organizations sponsor campus events geared toward engaging students in issues of global concern: the Global Review series, the International and Global Studies Seminar Series, events sponsored by the Office of Intercultural Programs and Services, the American Democracy Project lecture series, among others. The semester I taught ENG 283, both Christopher Hitchens and Stanley Fish spoke on campus. Students were encouraged to attend events and discuss them in class.
Theoretical Rationale

In Fall 2004, one year before I taught ENG 283, Cary Nelson delivered an American Democracy Project address at ISU. Nelson asked “Has Higher Education Failed?” in what he argues is its fundamental mission: to prepare critical citizens to participate in democracy. His answer: a resounding “yes!” Nelson argued that Humanities education is the foundation of a critical democratic citizenry (echoing the assertions made by Thomas Jefferson, then later by John Dewey) and that our job as educators—and in English in particular—is to help students critically look at public language and discourse. However, Nelson lamented the marginalization of the Humanities at this historical moment, citing decreases in funding for publications and the overall attitude both inside and outside the academy that what we do in English is not relevant to the lives of those outside our discipline. He called on English educators to fight the political and cultural forces that suppress the Humanities as a critical cultural tradition. Our jobs, he claimed, are crucial in continuing the struggle for a deliberative public sphere in the U.S. and for preparing students to participate effectively as citizens in a democracy. In effect, Nelson summed up in that lecture what I had been claiming as the long-term goals of my writing courses: to both technically prepare and ideologically inspire students to become critical activists, to be sophisticated agents of social change in their worlds.

Hearing Nelson’s lecture reinforced my objectives, but its context gave me pause. The country had just reelected George W. Bush as President, and I was distraught. What exactly was it we were doing, and why were we doing it? Training citizens for participation in a democracy is a noble cause for any academic discipline to pursue, but what exactly does that mean? For what are we, now, in this historical moment in the U.S., working toward? We do not live in a democracy; at best, we live in a democratic republic. And the democracy we envision as the point of origin for our system of government, the democracy of ancient Athens, was not as democratic as mythology would have us believe: citizenship, and by extension participation, was limited to Athenian-born male land owners. If democratic Athens of the 5th century B.C.E. were in place today, it would at best have to endure global scrutiny and condemnation; at worst, a U.S. invasion to “liberate” the oppressed non-citizenry.

If we in rhetoric and composition recognize that the notions of democracy in ancient Athens we base our notions of democracy on are illusions, we then too have to question what we see as the role of rhetoric in that system and our role in preparing citizens to examine and participate in public democratic discourse. I was sure that I wanted to include ancient Greek rhetoric in my courses, sure that what I had learned as a graduate student had made me a more critical, more engaged citizen—that it had given me language and
concepts to articulate and develop the disconnects I had located in public discourse. But was I being blinded by my own experience or training?

To complicate matters further, the same week Nelson spoke at ISU, Susan Miller discussed the “false and boring” history of rhetoric and the mind-body disconnect in “What’s Love Got to Do With It: An Emotional History of Rhetoric, A Rhetorical History of Emotion.” Miller argued that rhetoric, despite how it has been represented in textbooks, did not start with Corax and Tisias arguing land disputes in Sicily, but that in fact, communication (and the study of how it can be done effectively) had been taking place long before that. And at dinner, Miller went as far as to boldly assert, “There’s no such thing as rhetoric.” After my initial shock, I took her assertion to mean that our understanding of ancient rhetoric is so incomplete that to claim rhetoric is what we are studying or teaching is ridiculous.

I was aware of what C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon point out as the philosophical disconnect between the ideological framework of ancient rhetoric and modernity’s understanding of language: “Classical rhetoric tended to regard composition as though it were a system of skills which apprentices needed to study and practice in order to attain proficiency. By contrast, modern rhetoric views composing as a competence, manipulating signs on a page” (91). But I still felt ancient rhetoric was useful, even if for nothing more than setting the mission for discourse. After all, Aristotle himself defined rhetoric as political discourse, and Isocrates trained students to be critical participants in the democratic system of Athens—to be rhetorical theorists. I wanted my students to be rhetorical theorists.

This idea of training citizens to be critical participants in a democracy has changed, though, in part with the shift in thought about what it means to be a theorist. Professor of Political Science Patrick J. Deneen traces the etymology and history of “theorizing” back to the ancient Greeks. He explains that theoroi (the theorist), usually a philosopher, was selected to travel to foreign cultures to observe their practices, compare them to his own, and report this comparison to his city—a process geared toward reflection and progress for the native culture. In order to perform these tasks, theorists had to be both impeccable observers and staunch patriots—above all to be critical of their own culture while never losing love for it (34-35). Deneen argues that theory split from patriotism with Descartes; detaching himself from any specific place or culture, Descartes embodied what has now commonly become the theorist—the anti-patriot (39). At the same time, the patriot (and in effect, democracy) has been separated from theory. With current political thought equating dissent with treason, I felt I would need to work with the tenets of ancient Greece to return to the conceptualization of the theorist as patriot, theorizing as patriotism, and critical thought as democratic practice in order to thwart some of the possible student resistance.
Even if ancient Athens was a democracy for the few, for the elite, rhetoric was the base of education for these participants because they were expected to do just that—participate. In “BREAKING NEWS,” Shelley DeBlasis and I note that every citizen (narrowly and problematically defined) was trained in rhetoric because the political and judicial systems were conducted orally, and by law each citizen had to serve at some point in both public office and military service, at times even simultaneously. While Athenians shopped daily for household goods, they walked past legislative and judicial forums holding session and encountered philosophers and sophists professing democratic ideals to the city’s youth. In this sense, the Athenians had a literal and figurative public sphere in the agora. Literally, the agora, centered in the heart of Athens beneath the Parthenon, functioned as the marketplace—for commerce, government, and intellect. Figuratively, the agora was the space in which the polis discussed, interrogated, criticized, and reformed public and private issues.

If, as Nelson argued, I would advance the mission of English education to prepare students to participate in a metaphorical public sphere through language and discourse, I would need to consider how this discourse takes place. DeBlasis and I argue (in a work in progress) that rhetoric and composition pedagogy in postmodernity’s hyper-corporate capitalism has been complicated by the multiplicity of sites at which our students (and we) encounter discourse. With the proliferation of electronic media (namely the television and the Internet), we are bombarded with images, symbols, and words in diverse and complicated ways, demanding a revision in the understanding and teaching of language. In order to prepare my students to participate both as active receivers and critical senders of messages in the media circuses in which they are immersed daily, I wanted to take a multifaceted approach to pedagogy.

Kathleen Blake Yancey, in her 2004 Chair’s Address at the CCCC Convention, argued for and speculated about this new pedagogy. Yancey pointed out that writing is becoming more a part of the everyday lives of persons outside of school—much like reading literacy soared in the 19th century (298). She attributed this boom to advances in technology—namely the personal computer and the Internet and all the mechanisms for writing that come with them (emailing, instant messaging, blogging). In addition, meaning-making has taken on new forms through this media as people are becoming more frequently exposed to multi-modal texts. Much in the same vein as Yancey, Gunther Kress has discussed changes in communication styles in much of his work over the past decade. Kress points out that “the visual is becoming more prominent in many domains of public communication” and may be equally as informative as writing at this point in time (68, 76).
Kress and Yancey both call on educators to develop curricula that prepare students to compose in this new communicative environment. Kress says this new pedagogy would highlight skills necessary for effective communication: “the needs for dealing with constant change; the need to treat individuals as agentive in relation not only to the production of their textual objects, but also in relation to their constant re-making of their community’s representational resources; the interaction of many semiotic modes in a text; and to do so both from the maker’s and the reader’s point of view” (85-86). Yancey called for the same, asking members of CCCC to work toward “the creation of thoughtful, informed, technologically adept writing publics” (308).

While Yancey and Kress argue for important and necessary changes in their calls for education reform, both focus for the most part on the production of communication. I found this problematic. First, this approach perpetuates the individualistic, fetishized culture of mass communication. Yancey said students use technology to socialize with peers (302), and Kress stresses the designer’s interest in the composition of multi-modal texts (87; see Kress and van Leeuwen 6-11). These statements coincide in what Yancey herself admits is an unfortunate shift in the mission of higher education, “from the view that college is good for the country, a view that enfranchises all of us, . . . toward the view that higher education is good for the individual” (emphasis in original, 304). While both theorists gesture toward the cultural, social, economic forces in their writer’s/designer’s lives, their projects do not call for educators to complicate the roles these technologies play in maintaining the status quo, in effect in maintaining the hegemonic discourse of oppression. Instead, they argue that technological literacy is imperative to students’ success in their futures (see Kress 66, 86; Yancey 305, 320). Kress and Theo van Leeuwen argue that “visual literacy’ will begin to be matter of survival, especially in the workplace” (3).

This may be the case—especially when considering the re-categorization of the work force developed by former Clinton Secretary of Labor Robert B. Reich, in which “symbolic-analytic workers” who primarily “solve, identify, and broker problems by manipulating symbols” take a predominant role in global economic competition (178). However, the failure to problematize or complicate symbolic-analytic work in terms of what it does for the ideological and material dominant systems of power depoliticizes technology as a tool and a site for hegemonic struggle. I feel that if we are going to champion technology use in our classrooms, our curricula, and our own work, we need to be aware of and make others aware of the effects both this adoration and utilization will have on the larger political systems and power dynamics. For this reason, I wanted students to compare their experiences with different modes of texts, to see how they understood and reacted to public discourse differently if they engaged through print media, the Internet, or the television.
Second, this trend makes it easy to forget to educate students to consume these texts. Just because students can read print does not mean they can identify and understand the ideological messages conveyed through the words. In the same way, just because they understand the “visual grammar” of images does not mean they will be able to see the work those images do to perpetuate the dominant systems of power. Since students encounter multi-modal texts at every turn, I wanted the course to prepare them not only to compose these texts, but also to understand them.

I felt these concerns were particularly relevant in relation to political communication and the news media. As historiography has taught us (and particularly the work of Hayden White), historical (and media) accounts of events are always already fictionalized. Stuart Hall explains, “In the moment when a historical event passes under the sign of discourse, it is subject to all the complex formal ‘rules’ by which language signifies. To put it paradoxically, the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a communicative event” (167). Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” was the largest impetus for my course design. In it, Hall describes three perspectives from which television viewer-subjects could have received these stories. Through the “dominant-hegemonic position,” viewer-subjects passively receive the “professional code” (defined by the elite/privileged segment of the population to reproduce the hegemonic discourse which maintains its status), not actively decoding the stories but instead accepting their originally portrayed meanings as actual meanings—as unquestionable and natural reality (174). Through the “negotiated” position, viewer-subjects acknowledge the privileged discourse as privileged but maintain the option to adjust this reading to fit a more local (or the viewer-subjects’ own) position, creating an ambivalent disconnect between the subject and the message (174-75). Through the “oppositional code,” viewer-subjects “detotalize the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (175), rereading the privileged discourse in order to expose the ideological work the discourse is doing and rewrite the message.

I was hopeful that viewer-subjects would apply the third perspective to read critically the multiple stories of 9/11 dispensed through image and word. I read this historical incident as the most significant event viewer-subjects have witnessed electronically. I was hoping viewer-subjects taking an oppositional stance would have incited real reconsideration and rewriting of a hegemonic discourse, one which perpetuates oppressive systems of power. Unfortunately, viewer-subjects of the media coverage of 9/11 not only did not have the intellectual mechanisms with which to decode the dominant messages, but were already conditioned within their relationship with the medium of television to not even try. The culture of which viewer-subjects are both products and consumers conditioned them to receive such stories passively, to not read but accept them at face value, as was evident in the
presentation and reception of intelligence on Iraq’s weapons program that led up to the invasion in 2003. As late as 2006, 50% of Americans in a Harris poll believed that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, even after mainstream media outlets reported otherwise (Harper); I did not want my students to be included in that 50%.

The education system in the U.S. has not prepared citizens to counter dominant messages. With educational programs like No Child Left Behind and the current corporatization of higher education—not to mention threats to academic freedom led by David Horowitz and the Students’ Bill of Rights campaign—it is increasingly becoming more difficult for educators to present students (always already in their viewer-subject positions) with the alternative approaches that Hall proposes to reading dominant discourse. In rhetoric and composition, it will continue to be difficult if we maintain our focus on production. It will be necessary for us to find a way to counter these forces if we have any hope of continuing and enhancing the struggle necessary to counter dominant discourses of oppression.

The course I present here highlights Hall's alternative approaches and focuses on the realm of consumption: reading the news media through multiple rhetorical lenses. Through English 283: Rhetorical Theory and Application, students engaged with news events in multiple media, reading them for their persuasive and ideological purposes. Half of the course was devoted to ancient and modern rhetorical theory and argumentation and the other half to analyzing media representations of news events in televisual, hypertextual, and print media.

**Critical Reflection**

Green Day’s “American Idiot” was the #1 song of the summer, a critical account of the culture of fear perpetuated by the mainstream press and the complicity of its consumers. This was our class theme song, and on the first day I played it on repeat as students worked in groups to analyze the lyrics and identify the song’s thesis and main points. I thought that analyzing an object from popular culture would engage students in both the course content and methods from the first day. I was less concerned with how using the song would help establish my ethos, but I figured it would score some “cool points” for me and the course. I hadn’t counted on it affecting my ethos in another way, though. Students explained later in the semester that the song made them see from the beginning that these issues were of concern for people other than “the English teacher.” In her reflection, one student wrote, “Hearing the song made us think about what we were being told by the media from the first moment we stepped into class. It started discourse quite unassumingly being that it was a popular song, thus perpetuating what the class was trying to teach us about the media. How many of us really
think about the music we listen to?” This “unassuming-ness” was a recurring theme in student reflections, many of them saying that the responsibility and freedom they had in choosing articles to analyze each week in their webboard assignments allowed them to understand that the concepts we discussed in class were at play in their material lives without the teacher “stacking the deck” to force this importance.

Students were assigned webboard posts each week: one continued class discussion and commented on the reading; another applied the rhetorical analysis techniques to their assigned news sources. Inspired by Nelson’s plea to perpetuate citizen participation in public disourse, I compiled a list of over 70 mainstream and independent; local, national, and international; print, radio, Internet, and televisual news sources which students picked out of a hat and were instructed to follow for a 4-week period, at the end of which they would pick a new source.

Each week students were to analyze one segment from the source and post this analysis to the webboard. I was hoping they would move along Hall’s spectrum of viewer-subject positions. For a while, students approached the news assignment begrudgingly: many were unhappy with their sources because they were “boring” or advanced an agenda at odds with the students’ own ideology. Toward the middle of the semester, though, students became excited about their posts. Many mentioned in their reflections that they were intimidated by politics and the news before the course because they seemed complex and overwhelming, but that the course had given them both the vocabulary and techniques with which to understand the messages being transmitted.

And they offered much material to work with. As one student explained in his reflection,

An old Chinese curse goes, “May you live in interesting times.” The implication is that change is synonymous with upheaval and disjunction, and interesting times are essentially a bad thing. Well, as for our class, I think we are the best cursed generation of all. We have been fortunate that we are in this class and becoming news-conscious in very unfortunate times. The cultural climate in America over the last five years has changed drastically, and in the change we can contrast the news media now and before, and American news media versus international media.

Directly quoting this student, a member of his group continued in his reflection, “we are fortunate in that we have the benefit of living through very, very unfortunate times. Not only do we have a class that has 9/11 and the War on Terror to pick apart and analyze, but an equally huge media debacle took place right during our semester—I refer to Hurricane Katrina.”

Hurricane Katrina hit during the second week of classes. During the first week, students followed their news sources., and I was disappointed
and nervous by their first media posts. They followed the news the weekend before and week of Katrina, and only one out of 50 students mentioned race/class in her post. Ethically and pedagogically, I felt I needed to intervene, but I didn’t want to let the class turn its focus toward issues and away from discourse, possibly alienating conservative-leaning students or making students think (so early in the semester) that the course would be a “Bush-bashing” party. They had read Chapters 3 and 5 in Donald Lazere Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy for the class after Labor Day, so I used some of the major concepts in the text to guide our discussion. The text addressed “specific language use,” asking students to pay attention to word choice; I asked students to look at some of the language use under question in the media, for example, “looting” vs. “finding” vs. “looking for” food, “refugee” vs. “evacuee” vs. “victim,” and “conglomerate” used to describe the Department of Homeland Security. The text presented the debate surrounding “cultural literacy” and whether students can critically analyze arguments in public discourse without understanding the references made during them.

Contextualizing instruction in the news media proved an important departure from the approaches to rhetorical and critical analysis students had encountered before. Some students claimed ENG 283 illustrated material consequences of rhetoric. One explained, “I had previously placed little value on analyzing the rhetoric of everyday life in the media and advertisements. I knew rhetoric in writing papers and academic material was important, but I did not realize how evident it is everywhere.” Another argued, “A class such as this one makes students realize how important it is to think critically about what is going on around them. . . . This class is valuable because it not only gives students the skills to do so, but it also gives students the understanding of why it is important to understand the message behind our culture.”

Another departure for the course was the apparent transferability of the skills. Many students mentioned applying what they were learning in ENG 283 to their education, political science, history, mass communication, and other English courses. They came to see rhetoric as the metadiscipline for academic thought, reflecting the original goals of the course. One student wrote, “This class was useful training for students entering all career paths. Rhetoric isn’t about a specific area—rhetoric is about learning to step back and understand the flow of ideas that bombard us every day, and how those ideas affect us based on their presentation. It introduces skepticism, but a healthy kind backed up by analysis and insight.”

This disposition applied not only to their learning, but also to their teaching. Almost two-thirds of the students in the course were English Education majors. From secondary English, to history, to children’s literature, students described in their reflections how they would apply what they learned in
ENG 283 to their own classrooms. Reflecting how the course affected her, one student said,

the critical thinking that I have developed in this class will help me to flourish as a teacher and as a citizen. . . . Not only do I encounter rhetoric daily, through my reading and writing, but I am also responsible, as a teacher, for the rhetoric I use in my classroom. I may not teach a specific “rhetoric unit” but I can incorporate the study of rhetoric on a daily basis . . . as a student of the English language and as a teacher, rhetoric and the use of language connects to everything I do.

Even a student who was not an education major applied course material to teaching. This student volunteered for a social service program for unwed lower-income mothers. She was given the opportunity to teach three “life skills” classes that semester; she explained that in the past these classes taught such skills as how to change a diaper, choose a daycare, or put on a condom. She wanted to teach how to rhetorically analyze advertisements (as my students had for their second formal paper assignment). She asked if I had “basic” materials she could use, similar to when I taught freshmen. She also wanted to know how to make this skill seem urgent or immediate for participants; I suggested that she use multiple ads for the same product (four diaper ads) and have participants discuss how they make them feel and which they’d be more likely to buy and why.

Both this sense of responsibility and empowerment was evident in comments made by many students in class discussion and their written reflections. One student in particular summarily represented what many had mentioned. She wrote,

If, as a citizen, I begin to notice many news sources, policies, statements, etc. that contain rhetoric that I am personally and politically uneasy with, I can then have the grounds to take action against these things through lobbying, writing letters of concern, making phone calls, or starting a grassroots effort against the implementation of such policies. Being able to study rhetoric also helps me to become informed enough to enter into political discourse. In democracy, it is essential for many different types of discourse to exist, and being able to engage in this world of discourse will help me to become even more aware of different viewpoints and how my viewpoint can enter into conversation with the others.

While these students felt empowered by their newly acquired status of rhetoricians, eager to set forth and show others the light, by the end of the semester many other students became frustrated. One student explained,

Cynicism is an unfortunate by-product of this class. Whereas the curtain is drawn back, and the great and powerful Oz is exposed, the romance and
magic are gone. This class, in educating us for our own good, takes away some of the innocence and ignorance many have for the media at large. However, the rhetoric class learns they have been manipulated, played, programmed to be certain ways, buy certain products, and think certain ways. Although it is crucial to learn all this, trust and faith have been eliminated.

Another said,

This course has been a difficult and sometimes eye opening experience for me. Although this reflection makes all of the changes I have experienced seem simple and almost effortless, in all reality, these changes have been very difficult for me to experience. Many times throughout this semester my thoughts concerning the status and the future status of the United States have made me very upset and uncomfortable. I have gone from feeling safe, secure, and supportive of our government to feeling as though our government is secretive and coercive. In addition, I have gone from feeling as though the United States is a true democracy that values the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press to realizing that our government is not a true democracy and that the freedom of the press is dominated by a few rich and powerful conglomerates.

I am honestly left in a state of confusion. As a direct result of this class, I have much new knowledge and an entirely new perspective of this country. I must admit that this is a scary feeling. Nonetheless, I am so thankful for this new perspective. While it would have been much easier for me to disregard all of the information presented in class and to continue to see the world through the biased perspective of the media, I am so thankful that I am now equipped with the tools that will enable me to form my own educated and informed opinions about our government and about the media used to represent this government.

Students were having difficulty negotiating the cognitive dissonance associated with critical thinking and critical theory. Their foundations had been shaken, and because we had spent so much time on analysis and consumption, they could not see the agency that comes with critical thought. It seems as though I was guilty of the same reductive practices I had earlier accused Yancey and Kress of. Bruce McComisky has cautioned critical compositionists against this kind of valorizing of political themes at the expense of writing instruction—reminding those practicing critical pedagogy that Paolo Freire’s praxis necessitates reflection and action—so that writing assignments should involve both critical analysis of and rhetorical intervention in social problems. Otherwise, critique becomes an end in itself, which can be alienating or paralyzing for students by removing the hope from the pedagogy. When students asked what to do when all seems to be working against any kind of social equity or justice, my
response was that they could make choices in their personal lives based on their critical understanding of situations—that they could choose the people they wanted to be and be surrounded by. I explained that social change does not happen on a grand scale over night, and that they may not see the kinds of changes they want to even in their life times; still, they could make changes on the local levels and try to educate others to do the same. In my future courses, I will remember to design assignments that allow students to both theoretically analyze and materially intervene in the social problems we examine in class.

Overall, the course was successful in changing students’ understandings and definitions of such important concepts as rhetoric, discourse, bias, argument, and politics. While I may change some aspects of the course in the future, like the writing assignments to include more rhetorical action, I will continue to contextualize the course in the news media, and, unfortunately, I feel my students and I will continue to find this forum ripe with material to work with—or against.

Note

In the design and content of this syllabus and course, I have utilized ideas, concepts, and structures from the course design work of Professors Julie Jung and Shelley DeBlasis.

Works Cited


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Syllabus

ENG 283.001: Rhetorical Theory and Applications

As is the education of our youth, so from generation to generation will be the fortune of the state.

Isocrates

An enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic.

Thomas Jefferson

It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner [so that the] political violence [which] has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.

Michel Foucault

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course begins with multiple premises: that language shapes reality, that it is through an analysis of different texts that various power relations can be identified and researched, that everything is a text that can be read and analyzed, and that it is part of civic responsibility to analyze the various texts we come in contact with on a daily basis. With that in mind, the course will involve analyses of various news media—written and visual texts—in order not only to study the power relations and beliefs of reality illustrated and perpetuated through these texts, but also to learn how to engage better with these texts as critical citizens in a democracy. In this sense, this course will study issues of civic responsibility and engagement vis a vis the news media. Students will read theoretical texts on rhetoric, ideology and hegemony, and civic responsibility. They will be asked to discuss their understandings of/beliefs in these issues, as well as demonstrate these understandings/beliefs through written analyses of print texts, advertisements, television shows, films, and websites.

Students will improve their reading and writing skills, as well as their critical thinking abilities (or their abilities to apply common sense reasoning to analyses of provocative issues). It is my belief that these skills are indispensable to the functioning of a democracy and that part of the mission of higher education is to develop a critical, sophisticated body politic. Therefore, one of the goals in this course is for students to engage in public discourse
surrounding political issues. We will negotiate continually the definition of “political” throughout the course, but understand for now that this does not limit course content, discussions, or projects to issues of politics proper, or issues concerning the branches of government. This does mean, however, that students will be expected to identify, examine, and understand a full range of viable ideologies at play in public discourse—including their own—and how these affect discourse. The goals of this course do not include “labeling” individual students, issues, stances, or ideas “Republican” or “Democrat,” “Conservative” or “Liberal” for polemical purposes; instead, a goal is for students to view social issues from diverse perspectives and in their full complexity in order to engage these issues in informed, academic ways.

REQUIRED MATERIALS


Course Packet: available at Rapid Print after September 5.
Access to a computer with Internet access
A working ilstu.edu e-mail account that is checked regularly
A good dictionary

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

**Participation (10%)**
As this course hopes to incite dialogue among citizens concerned with current political affairs, it makes sense that this type of dialogue would be expected in this class. Students are expected to contribute productively to the learning experience of the class as a whole and of their groups in particular. This means arriving to class on time, having read/viewed the assigned texts, and being prepared to discuss the material in a way that will advance the project of the class.

**Web Board (35%)**
1. **Class Discussion**: One 250-500 word post, continuing class discussion or responding to the reading; this can be a response to someone else’s post, but it must be well organized, developed, and meet the word length requirement.
2. **News Report**: Each student will be assigned various news outlets to follow and analyze the coverage of certain stories. Students will discuss news coverage and methodologies of these sources and conduct rhetorical analyses in one 250-500 word post weekly.
3. **Presentations**: On Fridays, students will present a rhetorical analysis to the class. Each student will present once during the semester, and the
hand-out/write-up for the presentation will be posted to the web board in place of that student’s news report for the week.

Although web board posts may require you to briefly summarize the reading (a paragraph at most), you should make dis/connections across the readings, putting them in dialogue with each other and your own life/learning experiences. These posts should pose questions, problems, and/or suggest possibilities for future inquiry. Responses to posts offer opportunities to engage with your classmates. The goal is to construct a multi-voiced conversation; you should read (listen to) classmates carefully. Responses should acknowledge, respond to, and develop classmates’ ideas, questions, and points of inquiry by adding another point of view and interaction with the texts.

Web board posts will receive standard number grades. These posts should reflect active, critical engagement with the material. In other words, if work sounds or looks like you hurried to finish it five minutes before class, or if it is more descriptive than analytical, it will earn only a “C” or possibly a lower grade. Although the purpose of the web board is to offer opportunities to stretch and practice critical analytical abilities, be aware that punctuation and usage mistakes in any written work may impede/hinder a reader’s abilities to interpret your ideas and undermines your authority as a writer. Therefore, prepare to allow time to proofread and edit your written responses carefully.

It is the student’s responsibility to save all of web posts.

Rhetorical Analyses (45%)

Students will write three 5-10 page rhetorical analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Print-media analysis</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising/photograph analysis</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film/TV analysis</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Detailed assignment sheets will be provided at appropriate times in the semester.

Reflective Essay, due last week of class (10%)

Students will write an 8-10 page essay in order to engage in active reflection regarding WHAT they have learned this semester about language, rhetoric, ideology, information, citizenship, etc. and HOW they learned it. This essay is constructed to encourage you to think about how your study of rhetoric dis/connects to your major, career, citizenship, and life goals and experiences. In other words, how is the study of rhetoric in this course affecting or failing to affect your understanding and use of language in everyday habits as action and effect; or, so what? Now what?
**Campus Events**

Students are encouraged to attend campus events and lectures relevant to the course topics. For example, the University Program Board will sponsor “Behind the Swoosh: A Look Inside NIKE” on September 6, from 7:00-9:00 pm in the Bone Student Center Circus Room. The presenters spent a month in a Nike Indonesian worker’s slum living on $1.25 a day, a typical wage paid to Nike’s subcontracted workers. This program looks at the sweatshop controversy from a first person point of view.

The American Democracy Project is hosting Constitution Day on Friday, September 16, from 11:00-12:30 pm in the Bone Student Center Prairie Room. The event presents “Conversations with Supreme Court Justices”: United States Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O’Connor and Stephen Breyer will talk about the Constitution with students at the Supreme Court. The program will feature the Justices taking questions from students and discussing why we have and need a Constitution; what federalism is; how implicit and explicit rights are defined; and how separation of powers ensures that no one branch of government obtains too much power.

Other campus events relevant to the course include (but are not limited to) the Global Review series, the International and Global Studies Seminar Series, and events sponsored by the Office of Intercultural Programs and Services. Christopher Hitchens and Stanley Fish, two intellectuals/scholars who frequently write for newspapers and magazines, will speak on campus this semester.

These events typically will be listed on the University Calendar under the “Civic Engagement” topic. I will announce events as they are scheduled. Students who attend events can substitute one web board post for the week with a synopsis/analysis of the event. Please feel free to announce events in class, to refer to them during class discussion, and to check with me about events’ relevance to the course topics.

**CLASSROOM POLICIES**

All major assignments must be completed in order to pass the course. Even if a student is carrying an “A,” one missing major assignment will result in an “F” for the course. It is the student’s responsibility to keep copies of all work. I will not be held responsible for missing work, nor will I be sympathetic to computer problems. It is imperative that students back-up and frequently save their work. If something turns up missing, the student will need to provide a copy of it.
Course assignments are expected to be completed and in class on their designated due dates. If a student knows in advance that he or she will miss a class, that student needs to make prior arrangements with the instructor for submitting work on time. Late work (work not completed and in class by the due date for reason other than an excused absence) will receive one letter grade (10%) off for each day late, including weekends. Make-up and late work will only be considered in cases involving excused absences and when a student has made arrangements with the instructor prior to the due date.

**Classroom Etiquette**:
Please attend class prepared with the appropriate texts preread and assignments completed. Your preparation, participation, and energy are essential to the success of this course. All cellular phones, pagers, and other electronic devices must be turned off (not silenced) prior to each class session. Exceptions may be made for emergencies involving family illness or childcare with prior consent of instructor.

**Free Speech/Intellectual Interaction**:
Debate, critical inquiry, and intellectual diversity are essential elements to higher education and a process of learning. There is the potential during this course for controversial and sensitive topics to be discussed during small group or whole class interaction. Students are expected to demonstrate the utmost respect and courtesy for their peers with differing arguments, viewpoints, and/or experiences. Sexist, racist, homophobic, or inappropriate speech will not be tolerated.

**Intellectual Dishonesty and Cheating**:
University policies regarding academic integrity and plagiarism will be upheld in this course. Intellectual dishonesty is defined as using someone else’s word(s), phrase(s), and/or idea(s). Cheating is defined as submitting someone else’s work as one’s own or allowing another student to do one’s work. Intellectual dishonesty and cheating are unacceptable in this and all university courses. Instances of intellectual dishonesty (including proof of plagiarism) and cheating may result in disciplinary action taken against you, which could include a failing grade earned for the course and notification of the violation(s) to the university. For further information on the University’s policies on Academic Integrity, please consult the *Undergraduate Catalog 2005-2006*.

**Academic Accommodations**:
Any student with a disability is encouraged to meet with the instructor during the first week of class to discuss reasonable accommodations. Accommodations will be made when the instructor is presented with documentation from the Office of Disability Concerns, which is a prerequisite for receiving such accommodations. Please contact the Office of Disability Concerns located at 350 Fell Hall, (309) 438.5853 (voice) or (309) 438.8620 (TTY/TDD).
TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE

This schedule is tentative and subject to additions and deletions.

**Wk 1**  introduction to course, syllabus, and theme song (Green Day “American Idiot”); Lazere 1; label exercise; instructor presentation; literacy map

**Wk 2**  Lazere 16; pick news sources; Lazere 2; student presentations

**Wk 3**  Lazere 3 pp. 64-71, 76-80; Lazere 5; student presentations

**Wk 4**  Lazere 8; Lazere 9, CP Luntz Playbook “Appendix 14;” student presentations

**Wk 5**  paper 1 due; CP Postman “The Bias of Language;” advertising exercises; Lazere 19; student presentations

**Wk 6**  Lazere 6; pick news source; Lazere 7; student presentations

**Wk 7**  CP Kilbourne articles; CP Body Wars chapters; view Killing Us Softly 3; CP Selfe “Lest We Think the Revolution;” Sternberg “Economy of Icons;” student presentations


**Wk 9**  Lazere 10; Lazere 11/12; student presentations

**Wk 10** paper 2 due; CP Hall “Encoding/Decoding”; pick news sources; CP Blakesley “Introduction;” student presentations

**Wk 11**  Lazere 14; CP Lakoff “Metaphor and War;” student presentations

**Wk 12**  Lazere 15; CP Goodman excerpts, view Independent Media in a Time of War; student presentations

**Wk 13**  Lazere 18; CP Ritter “Postmodern Dialogics;” view OUTFOXED

**Wk 14**  Thanksgiving Break, no classes

**Wk 15**  paper 3 due; Lazere 17; new web board focus; CP Manufacturing Consent excerpts; student presentations

**Wk 16**  Lazere 16; reflective essay due; student presentations
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