

RHETORICAL CRITICISM AS THE ASKING OF QUESTIONS

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In this essay, an undergraduate course in rhetorical criticism is described that has as its purpose teaching students to think rhetorically—to make habitual the asking of questions about the nature and functions of symbols. The course is designed around three major questions students/critics are likely to ask: “What is the relationship between the rhetoric and its context?” “How does the message construct a particular reality for the audience and the rhetor?” and “What does the rhetoric suggest about the rhetor?” Various critical methods are studied as appropriate for answering each question.

OBJECTIVE

The primary aim of my undergraduate course in rhetorical criticism is to teach students to think rhetorically. The course is designed to encourage students to become inquisitive about the symbol use around them—to make habitual the asking of questions about the nature and functions of symbols. I hope that, as a consequence of the course, when the students see a film, they will want to discover why they responded to it as they did. When they decorate their apartments and dorm rooms, they will think about the furniture and posters they choose, conscious of the effects of their choices both on them and on their visitors. They no longer will watch advertisements on television uncritically; they will watch in an effort to discover the features of the ad that attract or repel them. When they become fans of a rock group, they will be able to articulate why. In short, the students should become discriminating consumers of symbols, ready to question and investigate the rhetorical phenomena around them.

One way to accomplish this goal is through a criticism course designed around a process of asking questions. In such an approach, the impetus for criticism is a question the student wants to answer about how rhetoric operates, and criticism is done in an effort to discover the answer. The definition of criticism I use in criticism courses makes clear that questions are asked in order to generate knowledge about rhetorical processes: “the investigation and evaluation of rhetorical acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (Foss, 1989, p. 5).

A question-asking approach is not typically taken in rhetorical criticism courses. Undergraduate courses on rhetorical criticism often are developed either around method or type of artifact. With a focus on method, students do critical analyses using such methods as the neo-Aristotelian, metaphoric, fantasy-theme, pentadic, and generic approaches, and the emphasis is on how well particular methods of criticism are applied by the students. In courses organized around types of artifacts, the assumption seems to be that particular kinds of artifacts require certain kinds of criticism. In such courses, students learn to do criticism of, for example, television, film, music, literature, and speeches. While these courses undoubtedly accomplish

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important objectives, I suggest that a course with a question-asking focus provides benefits not as easily available in courses designed around method or artifact.

BENEFITS OF A QUESTION-ASKING FOCUS

A number of reasons are possible for why undergraduate courses in criticism do not center on the asking of questions. Simply getting students to apply a couple of critical methods appropriately is difficult enough; to introduce the notion of asking a question as the impetus for the critical process complicates that process. Some instructors may believe that undergraduate students are not capable of thinking in sophisticated theoretical terms and will be unable to grasp the question-asking starting point of criticism. We may be more likely to have these impressions of students, however, when a criticism course does not make a lot of sense to them. A question-asking focus is one way to introduce a clear and cogent purpose and structure into the course.

Clarity is not the only result of a question-asking focus in a criticism course. Such a focus encourages students to become more effective communicators. Because the critical analyses they do are used to answer questions about how symbols affect us, students readily can make connections between the knowledge they gain from asking questions and their own communication activities. Critical analyses provide students with options for constructing their own messages and knowledge of the likely consequences of their choices. While these skills are useful to them as students, they are perhaps even more useful to them in the professions they will enter after graduation. Lawyers, teachers, social-service workers, and business personnel all benefit from the habits of asking questions about communication, analyzing messages, responding sensitively and appropriately, and creating messages specifically designed to accomplish their goals.

Another benefit of a criticism course organized around the asking of questions about communication is that it makes clear the connection between rhetorical criticism and other communication courses in the curriculum. Students are able to see that rhetorical criticism is one means of generating information about the function of symbols, which also is the topic of the other courses they study in speech communication.

In addition, such rhetorical criticism courses are easier to sell to university administrators than courses with method or artifact featured. These courses are explicitly related to the skills of critical thinking and introduce students to the process by which knowledge is constructed in a discipline. A university education is about asking questions, and a rhetorical criticism course can be connected to this goal easily if questions become the core of the course.

STRUCTURE OF COURSE

The questions students/critics are likely to ask about rhetoric tend to fall into three main categories, and a criticism course can be organized around them. (For greater detail on this approach, see Foss, 1989).

One question emphasizes the context or environment that spawned the rhetorical artifact: "What is the relationship between the rhetoric and its context?" The relationship between a rhetorical artifact and its context is, of course, the subject of a continuing debate in the speech communication field. Some critics believe that contexts or situations call rhetoric into existence, while others believe that the existence of situations and how they are defined depend on the perspectives of the

individuals involved. A middle view holds that the situation does not control the response of the rhetor, but neither is the rhetor free to create a situation at will.

In this unit, the critical methods covered feature the relationship between the rhetorical artifact and its context in various ways. In neo-Aristotelian criticism, a major step is the reconstruction of the context for the artifact, including the rhetor's background and the setting, audience, and occasion in which the artifact occurred. Generic criticism fits here, too, with its emphasis on understanding rhetorical practices in different contexts through a discovery of the similarities in those contexts and the rhetorical artifacts constructed in response to them. Feminist criticism also works well as a sample method that features the relationship between rhetoric and context. It deals with one particular aspect of context and its relation to a rhetorical artifact—the construction of gender in the society. In this type of criticism, the analysis of the artifact is used to alter the definition of gender in the society and thus the nature of the context for the artifact itself.

The second question covered in the course is, "How does the message construct a particular reality for the audience and the rhetor?" Here the critic's primary focus is on the message and on what happens within the message so that it generates a particular world view, reality, or perspective for those involved with it. Two methods are particularly useful to include in the course as samples for answering questions about the message. Metaphoric criticism involves an examination of one particular form of expression—the metaphor—to discover the content used by a rhetor to discuss a topic. Narrative criticism is an approach in which the critic investigates rhetorical artifacts with a story form in order to discover the content of the world view that is created within the confines of that form.

In some instances, the critic is interested primarily in the personal dimension of the artifact or in the artifact as an expression of its rhetor. Such a focus on the rhetor is guided by the question, "What does the rhetorical artifact suggest about the rhetor?" The critic who is interested in the artifact as reflective of its rhetor generally seeks to discover how rhetors perceive and interpret the world, their inner life, and how their perspectives motivate them to act as they do; rhetors' symbol use provides clues to help answer these questions.

Three methods are particularly useful as examples of approaches designed to provide insights into rhetors' interpretations of the world and thus their motives for action. One is fantasy-theme criticism, which may be used to discover the shared consciousness of a group of individuals, thus suggesting how they are likely to act in the context of that consciousness. The last two methods were devised by Kenneth Burke for inquiring into a rhetor's motives. The pentad is designed to help the critic discover motive through the identification of the term the rhetor features in describing a situation. In the cluster approach, the rhetor's inner state is investigated through a discovery of the meanings of the individual's key terms.

Although the course content is divided into these three general questions, emphasizing different parts of the rhetorical process, I do not believe that any element of the rhetorical process operates independently of the others; context cannot be discussed, for example, without discussing the message or the rhetor. Thus, while the course is divided by emphasis on questions about different aspects of the rhetorical process, these divisions are represented to the students as fluid. They should not limit the critic to a discussion of only one element of the rhetorical process simply because a method that emphasizes it has been selected.

The option of creating a new critical method if one does not exist that allows the

student to answer the question asked also is emphasized. Essentially, this is the grounded-theory approach to theory generation developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), although the idea need not be introduced using these terms in the course. The questions students ask may suggest particular ways of answering them, and students are not restricted to the pre-formulated methods devised by others. While most undergraduate students are not adventuresome or confident enough to employ a grounded-theory approach to criticism, they are encouraged to try it in any of the units of the course if the question they want to answer cannot be answered by the methods covered in class.

TEACHING METHODS

A four-step approach is used to teach the three questions and the methods covered under each. For each method, students are given a variety of learning activities so that they become comfortable and confident in their application of that method to answer questions. The first approach is a lecture in which the method is explained. The instructor discusses the question(s) for which its use is appropriate, its history, the key concepts, and the steps involved in using the method.

The second step is a class analysis of one or two rhetorical artifacts. The instructor brings to class rhetorical artifacts that are interesting to and relevant for the students—the cover of the Talking Heads' album, *Little Creatures*; the lyrics to Don McLean's "American Pie"; an advertising catalogue for Marshall Field's department store; or an art work from Judy Chicago's *The Birth Project*, for example. Together, the class members and the instructor formulate a research question to ask about the artifact and go through each of the steps in the method, applying them to the artifact. The session concludes with a discussion about how to interpret and evaluate what has been discovered through the analysis and what has been learned about rhetorical processes as a result of analyzing the artifact.

In the third step of teaching each method, students read critical essays in which the method has been used—essays both by speech communication scholars and students from previous criticism courses. Student essays are probably more useful models for undergraduate students because they are shorter, less intimidating, and generally demonstrate the method more clearly than do the essays by professional rhetorical critics. These sample essays are discussed in class, and students are asked to pick out the steps of the method evident in the essays and to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

Each unit culminates with students writing their own essays of criticism using the method being studied. In these short (five or six pages in length) essays, students analyze artifacts of their choice—discursive or non-discursive. Although the essays are short, they should include: (1) an introductory paragraph that orients the reader to the question and suggests why it is important; (2) a description or brief overview of the artifact so that the reader becomes somewhat familiar with it; (3) a description of the critical method that briefly summarizes the method used and suggests why it is appropriate for answering the research question; (4) a report of the findings of the analysis, where the student tells what has been discovered from an application of the method to the artifact; (5) an interpretation or discussion of what the analysis of the artifact means; (6) an evaluation of the artifact, where the student assesses or judges the degree to which the artifact is a model of or meets the standards of effective rhetorical practice; and (7) a discussion of the contribution made to the understanding of rhetoric as a result of the analysis.

Knowing what to cover in an essay of criticism is not enough to produce a good essay. The stance the students are encouraged to adopt in the writing of their essays is special. It derives from a major assumption on which the process of rhetorical criticism is based—that phenomena in the world cannot be proven objectively to be one way or the other. Thus, students are not trying, in their analysis of an artifact, to find the one correct interpretation of it. Instead, knowledge about the artifact is rhetorical; students only know the artifact through the symbols applied to it. This assumption suggests four standards concerning authorial stance that students are encouraged to meet in their essays.

One standard is argumentation. Students cannot verify the dimensions and qualities of an artifact objectively, so their task in writing their essays is to offer reasons for the claims they make. Students do this by presenting samples of the data of the artifact and showing how these data led to the conclusions they drew about them.

Coherence is another component of the stance students are asked to take in the writing of their essays. Students are asked to order and present the perspective they have taken on the artifact so it is coherent and makes sense to the reader. They must demonstrate the characteristics of a good storyteller—putting together examples and arguments in a narrative in a way that explains clearly and thoroughly the most significant aspects of the artifact.

Because the students know the artifact being studied only through the symbols they use to examine it, their personal interpretations are inevitably involved in their criticism; objectivity and impartiality are impossible. A third standard students attempt to meet in their writing is acknowledgment of subjectivity. Students are encouraged to recognize that they bring to the critical task particular values and experiences that are reflected in how they see and write about the artifact. They can acknowledge this subjectivity by presenting claims not as truth about reality but simply as one way of describing the artifact, admitting their own interest in and involvement with the artifact, and explaining the nature of their interest and involvement to the reader.

Finally, students are asked to write so that their essays reflect presentation of choice. If reality is not something that can be known objectively, then human beings must be seen as having the freedom to choose how to interpret the world and how to act in light of their interpretations. Students are encouraged to write their essays so that human beings are not reduced to the status of things that can be controlled and predicted but instead are seen as self-defining, initiating, flexible, and diverse in their interpretations and motives. Students can write to recognize human choice by acknowledging the choices open to the rhetor who is being studied—describing some of the choices that were open to the rhetor that were not selected. Another way to feature choice is to allow the rhetors being studied to express themselves in their own terminology and contexts as fully as possible. The rhetor selected specific words or actions to achieve particular goals, and the students accord value to those words and actions by citing them exactly.

Students summarize their essays in class so that they are exposed to multiple ways in which the method can be employed and to the insights their classmates have generated. Students ask questions about the essays and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. These essays are the only written assignments in the course; the test of students' knowledge about rhetorical criticism is their ability to write excellent critical essays.

I know I have accomplished my goals in my criticism courses when, at the end of a quarter, students tell me they “can’t do anything or go anywhere without analyzing and evaluating things.” What they mean is that they are no longer oblivious to the symbols in their environment. They cannot help asking questions about the symbols they encounter, analyzing how they are functioning, and discovering how they have the impact they do. In other words, they no longer are able to approach the world from an uncritical or unreflective stance. The consequences, I hope, are more effective communicators and more carefully constructed symbolic worlds.

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