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## Teaching Philosophy

During the 2006-2007 academic year, the Department of Biology at Iowa State University approached ISUComm (the ISU comprehensive multimodal communications program) with a request for a new course. All undergraduates at Iowa State are required to take a course in advanced communications, and until recently the only courses generally available were business communication and technical communication. The faculty in the biology department did not feel that those course options were particularly appropriate to the future of their students. It seems that 60-70 % of ISU biology students go on to graduate school or professional programs such as medical school, veterinary school, or pharmacy school. Rather than an expertise in corporate memos or product instructions, these students needed to know how to design and deliver academic genres such as review articles, conference presentations, and research posters.

As an available graduate student with a research history in the rhetorics of evolutionary biology and medicine, I was selected to design, develop, implement, and assess this new course, and so English 312: Biological Communications was borne. Since this was my first opportunity to develop a course from the ground-up, so to speak, it allowed me an opportunity to reflect on what I really think are the important elements of pedagogical theory and practice. Following this reflection, I have come to the conclusion that on a fundamental level, I believe that most everything can and should be taught as a representational practice or a literacy. Multiliteracies theorists have inaugurated a new age of semiotics research where the basic skills of phonetics, reading, and written language no longer have a monopoly on what it means to have representational literacy. Indeed, the contemporary multiliteracies theorists teach a whole host of representational practices divided into a myriad number of modes (written, oral, visual, gestural), media (ink and paper, wide screen, the internet), and genres (essays, web pages, and visual arguments). Of course, the physical dimensions of these practices are not the ultimate goals of multiliteracies education. Rather, as Gegerly Ulmer identifies in the foreword to *Literacy Theory in the Age of the Internet*, the three traditional goals of literacy instruction include: 1) "The ability to write...the ability to transform information into knowledge using the practices of literacy," 2) "Critical thinking and the ability to recognize the difference between a true and a false argument," and 3) "Self-knowledge" (x).

Stepping back from the grandiose goals of critical thinking and self-knowledge, I find that, for me, the most important goal in a literacy education has been dubbed by the New London Group (NLG), "transformed practice" or what I might call rhetorical facility. Essentially, this is the ability to use knowledge about communication in one context in order to have success in another. Returning to my course in biological communications, transformed practice was always the goal—i.e. how could I help my students deploy the skills learned in the classroom once in the professional contexts they would enter after graduation? In attempting to meet this goal, I designed a course that involved a recursive progression through critical analysis, direct instruction, and simulated practice. For example, in one unit the students and I explore the rhetorical strategies used in a revolutionary article in biological sciences. And then we explore the fallout: the objections, the criticisms, the retorts, the appeals to the media, and finally the process of closure—the resolution of debate and the establishment of a new theory. Only after this process do I teach the genre conventions of a research article, the modes of expression for scientific objectivity, and the basic tools of rhetorical awareness. Now armed with the metalanguages of rhetorical analysis, we revisit the case-study and reinterpret the successes and failures. After this entire process, I assign the students to write a research report in a simulated situation. While direct instruction in genre conventions is probably closer to what the biology department had in mind, I have found that the case approach allows me much

greater success in fostering both rhetorical awareness and transformed practice. In my experience students of the case approach produce essays that more successfully respond to the demands of the discursive context and the potential objections that may follow than do those students who algorithmically apply the genre conventions.

While I have been focusing on biological communications, I have the same goals and underlying philosophy for rhetorical analysis and criticism. Indeed, if “literacy” constitutes the successful use of signs and symbols in particular contexts, and a student of a successful program of literacy education demonstrates critical thinking, effective analytic skills, and self-knowledge, then anything I could possibly teach constitutes a literate practice, and education in rhetorical theory and criticism constitutes a literate practice of the utmost difficulty. What is critical/cultural analysis if not a literate practice? What is authoring an article in the rhetoric of science if not a literate practice? Of course, I could continue with these questions *ad infinitum*, but I rather think my point has been made.

Working closely with Dr. Michael Mendelson, a scholar of sophistic rhetoric and rhetorical pedagogy, we developed a new (to our department) approach to the course in rhetorical analysis and criticism that approached the material not as knowledge to be absorbed, but as a representational practice to acquire. This fundamental reorganization of the course was grounded in what Dr. Mendelson dubbed the “workshop model.” Dr Mendelson streamlined his overt instruction down to a six-page glossary of rhetorical terms, provided models of rhetorical criticism using those terms and set his students to practicing according to the model. While my approach to the course made use of far more reading in the theory and practice of rhetorical criticism, workshoping was the backbone of the class. Through considerable time spent working in groups the students explored the modes of criticism, the limits of the models, and the success of their peer’s efforts; the results were tremendously satisfying. While the extensive workshoping gave me fewer opportunities for formal evaluation of student work, the assignments produced demonstrated impressive improvement from the beginning of the semester. Students seemed to develop not only a testable knowledge of the theoretical material, but also a facility for applying it in critical practice. Since the workshop environment involves applying the same theoretical approaches to a variety of rhetorical artifacts, it makes great strides towards facilitating transformed practice. Indeed, the entire course is designed to instill in students a sense of flexibility of application for each of the critical approaches.

While all of my teaching experience has been at the undergraduate level, I am confident that my philosophical approach to pedagogy would serve me well at the graduate level. I am not sure I have met a single faculty member who is working in precisely the same subject area as their dissertation beyond tenure (and only a handful past the third-year review). Why is this relevant? Because success in the academy appears to be for most people a process of transformed practice. One goal of graduate education seems to be to prepare a student for success as a member of the faculty. It involves education in a number of theories and methods, but also in the means of discovering and building new theories and methods, applying them to new cases, and producing new scholarship for new venues. I would be delighted to teach graduate coursework in rhetorical theory, rhetoric of science, rhetoric of medicine, qualitative research methods and new media, and in each of these courses, I would endeavor to prepare my students for the responsibilities beyond the classroom, for transformed practice.