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## **Connecting Post-Process Theory to Classical Rhetoric: A Tale of Reclaiming Rhetoric**

### **Introduction**

It was Thursday pot-luck lunch day in the second week of the San Antonio Writing Project's Summer Institute, and Naomi Shihab Nye was with us to share lunch, read poetry and talk about writing. Naomi is a dynamic, gifted person and writer, and she stood before us with her trademark ponytail swept over her left shoulder, causing her hair to cascade in front of her. In the room were teachers from 1<sup>st</sup> grade to the university level who taught various disciplines from English to Social Studies. Within moments of starting to speak she said, "We are all bound by the belief in the writing process." Her words were like an embrace inviting us all into the shared enterprise and joy of writing. In fact, the third day of our Summer Institute had been devoted to sharing and discussing our own writing processes. Yet as I heard Naomi voice our shared belief in the writing process, I was troubled. In the past week, I had been reading ideas from "post-process" scholars who were stating things like, "no codifiable or generalizable writing process exists or could exist" (Kent 1), that "process is no longer a viable explanation of the writing act" (Breuch 97), and that "writing cannot be taught" (Breuch 99). Most teachers share a fundamental belief in the writing process to explain the nature of writing and how it is taught; however, here was a theory calling into question one of the fundamental paradigms of contemporary writing instruction. This paper seeks to address the dissonance I felt attempting to

reconcile Naomi's powerful words about the writing process with the post-process trend in writing scholarship I had been studying.

Post-process beliefs about writing seem alienating to the typical writing teacher like me and the other teachers who sat in that room that day listening to Naomi. For these teachers, as well as others like them, I want to share my journey as I have sought to understand what post-process ideas about writing mean. In this article I seek to reconcile post-process perspectives on writing by grounding its views in classical rhetoric. By linking some of post-process theory's ideas to classical rhetoricians like Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintillian, I want to help teachers understand post-process theory and see its positive call for reform in how we pursue writing instruction.

### **Out of the Trap**

Thomas Kent in the introduction to his 1999 collection of essays on post-process theory characterizes post-process scholars as not all agreeing on what constitutes "post-process," but they all would agree that "change is in the air." He says, "They see the process tradition giving way to something new... a new way of talking about writing and about what writers do" (4). Hence, writing teachers need to understand these scholars' different, if not new, ways of approaching writing. However, the post-modern roots of many of post-process' assumptions about writing are problematic, to say the least, for many teachers not acclimated or amenable to post-modern perspectives. "Post" in post-process connects directly to "post-modernism," and in Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch's estimation the chief agenda of post-process scholarship is as an "argument to forward postmodern and anti-foundationalist perspectives" (98). This agenda becomes for typical writing teachers a trap out of which it is hard to climb. What theory of writing with a straight face could make this claim: "I suggest that there is no

identifiable post-process pedagogy that we can concretely apply to writing classrooms” (98). How is a third grade language arts, or a 7<sup>th</sup> grade or 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher (much less a college composition instructor) to understand such a stance?

Before we can glean what is useful from post-process theory, I believe we need to avoid the trap of post-modern theories. Helen Ewald refers to the “tangled web” of post-modern themes that constitute a “web of discourse that has the potential to sustain or to ensnare those interested in post-process approaches” (116). Post-modernism, as Lyotard defined it, is a rejection of meta-narratives, of any generalizable statements of truth: “The post-modern critique of theory as totalizing, essentialist, and a residue of Enlightenment thinking has made clear that any attempt to construct a generalizable explanation of how something works is misguided” (Olson 8). Such a stance, for example, rejects Aristotle’s systematic description of rhetoric because all systems are rejected. The writing process as a paradigm which makes generalizable claims about how people write is similarly untenable because it seeks to make a Theory of Writing and systematize what cannot be systematized.

While most writing teachers won’t argue with the valid point that “the” writing process should be shifted to “many” writing processes, the post-modern agenda goes even farther to undercut the foundations of communication as well. Post-process theorists look to Davidson’s “theory of triangulation,” notions of paralogic hermeneutics, and Kent’s “hermeneutic guessing” to atomize communication. At this discrete level of communication, they make these claims:

...every moment of communicative interaction is unique. Our acts of interpretation are not codifiable in any logical manner since discourse does not operate in any logico-systematic manner and never remains static long enough to develop concrete understandings of the communication interaction. In other

words, there are no codifiable processes by which we can characterize, identify, solidify, or grasp discourse, and, hence there is no way to teach discourse, discourse interpretation, or discourse disruption. (Dobrin 132-33)

Communication happens via “guessing” and “by wit, luck, and wisdom” (Kent, “Externalism” qtd. in Foster 152). To give Davidson, Kent and others credit, they do work out a complex way in which communication actually occurs, but we can see the “anti-foundationalist” assumptions in their views. We are dangling, without any sure truths to anchor ourselves upon and have only interpretation (hermeneutics or guesswork) to find our way. We are like a blind man attempting to find his way within a different room each time he speaks.

As radical as this view toward truth and communication may seem, it is in fact quite old. Gorgias, the ancient Greek Sophist, maintained similar views to today's post-modernists: "Following Empedocles, Gorgias believed that provisional knowledge is the only knowledge we can attain. He denied the existence of transcendent essence....Hence, human encounters with the world and the exchange of knowledge about it are necessarily limited, provisional, and shared experiences that rely upon a shared deception effected by language" (Bizzell and Herzberg 42-43). These views from almost 2400 years ago match today's post-modernists. Indeed, a long tradition of skepticism has denied the existence of absolute truth (or what post-modernists might call meta-narratives). Extreme skeptical views, however, can lead to absurd paradoxes. Plato makes fun of this kind of twisted logic of the sophists in his dialogue entitled the *Sophist*. In the conclusion of this dialogue, the characters in the dialogue reach this absurd conclusion: "the many-headed Sophist has compelled us, quite against our will, to admit the existence of non-existence." The modern critic Wayne Booth voices a similar opinion

about the paradoxical trap of extreme skepticism: "When any thinker says, 'No claim to truth is sound, because all claims are only relative to the prejudices or culture of the claimer,' that skeptic forgets that the claim is itself a claim to truth, which itself is *refuted* by the claim" (384). We see this type of paradox at work in Davidson's beliefs about language which underlie his "paralogic hermeneutics" and idea of "language in use" that influences many of the post-modern assumptions in post-process theory. Seeking to support the idea that language is totally situated and free of convention (and thus totally interpretive), he makes the striking statement, "There is not such thing as language" (qtd. in Breuch 111). He uses language and conventions of language himself to assert that there is no language or basis to language.

Booth points to our first way out of this trap by his efforts to steer a middle course between extreme dogmatism and extreme skepticism. He looks to Richard McKeon's notion of pluralism to affirm that there are many truths while ruling out the possibility for a single agreed upon Truth: "I here embrace the notion that there are multiple truths, depending on one's primary assumptions. Many diverse thought-modes reveal truths that are discernable only in that mode.... There are—to repeat—many different truth-systems" (381). We can even envision a "truth-system" that denies the existence of any truth.

The second way out of the post-modern trap depends upon our view of contingency. Contingency, as Thomas Farrell points out, was not created by the post-modernist, but has been the special subject of rhetoric since the time of the Sophists (*Norms* 76). For Gorgias, as for the other classical rhetors, it is precisely those subjects that are contingent and uncertain that generate the need for rhetoric, for we require this form of communication to make sense of and operate within the

uncertain. For Aristotle, the art of rhetoric deals with things that "belong to no definite science" (1354a), "the probable" or those things that "may be one way or another" (1357a).

Distinguishing the contingent from the necessary or the impossible, Aristotle determines the subject matter of the contingent to be "perishable circumstances, incomplete knowledge, and fallible human action" (Farrell *Norms* 78). Our job as ethical rhetors (and human beings) is to deal with this contingency as reliably as we are able. The question remains what scope we attribute to this contingency. Post-modernists and post-process theorist would expand contingency to be all encompassing, while Aristotle and other classical rhetors would carve out only those things that are not "scientific truths" (or demonstratable truths) as the realm of the contingent.

Post-process and classical rhetorical views of contingency actually merge. The post-modern notion that language is not codifiable and not systemetizable (especially any system declaring a process of writing), that "knowledge is situated, indeterminate, and thoroughly hermeneutic" (Breuch 102) resembles the traditional realm of rhetoric as the probable and uncertain. We can see this similarity in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: "individual cases are so infinitely various that no systematic knowledge of them is possible. ...The duty of rhetoric is to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon without arts or systems to guide us" (1357a). The "hermeneutic guessing game" discussed by post-process scholars where "writers engage in... attempting to suit their interpretations and their writing to the interpretations of those whom they wish to communicate" is actually the ancient practice of rhetoric, though under a new name. If we don't let the post-modern notions of contingency get "overplayed," as Shaun Gallagher says in her critique of postmodern hermeneutics, we can begin to understand the

concepts and goals of post-process theory within the more familiar lens of classical rhetoric ("Phronesis in the Paralogic Situation").

The last trap buster has to do with how we define rhetoric (or communication)—whether we see it as a subject or a faculty (or activity). As Kathleen Welch points out, throughout the history of rhetoric it has been considered as both subject and activity: "Classical rhetoric, from Corax to the Sophists, to Plato and Aristotle, and on into the Romans, is consistently regarded as a faculty, an ability, as much as it is conceived of as a subject for study" (93). We see clearly, using Aristotle as an example, that we might systematize the "subject" of rhetoric, but no such systematization is possible for individual cases. At the beginning of the *Rhetoric*, he says about rhetoric and dialectic that "the subject can plainly be handled systematically, for it is possible to inquire the reasons why some speakers succeed through practice and others spontaneously" (1354a). This system of rhetoric he refers to as an "art." A bit later, though, he distinguishes this art from actual practice where the subject must be applied to the particular:

But none of the arts theorize about individual cases. Medicine, for instance, does not theorize about what will help cure Socrates or Callias, but only about what will help to cure any or all of a given class of patients: this alone is its business: individual cases are so infinitely various that no systematic knowledge of them is possible. In the same way the theory of rhetoric is concerned not with what seems probable to a given individual like Socrates or Hippias, but with what seems probable to men of a given type. (1357a)

From this perspective, we can see that post-process theory has a near-sighted focus on communication as a situated activity, in its particular form, and dismisses the more general "subject" of communication.

But we can affirm, as Gallagher does in her critique of radical hermeneutics, that "Our past, our traditions, our practical interests always condition our situation, so that whatever temporary contract or consensus we agree to, whatever new paradigm we invent, it will never be absolutely without precedent" ("Phronesis in the Paralogic Situation"). For example, from the examination of many effective pieces of writing, we might determine some characteristics of effective introductions.

However, each time a writer engages in a new writing act, he or she must approach that particular introduction uniquely. Past experience and our knowledge of the "subject" of writing may guide us, but our enactment of that knowledge within the particular situation is different each time we write. If we can comfortably accept that "post-process theory encourages us to reexamine our definition of writing as an activity rather than a body of knowledge," then we have come a long way in escaping the possible trap that post-process theory can become (Breuch 110).

### **Valid Critiques**

Thomas Farrell refers to this same subject-ability split in the view of rhetoric as the difference between "*techné*" and "*dynamis*." *Teche*, as Grimaldi defines it is "a system of rules or principles derived from experience" (qtd. in Farrell *Norms* 65). *Dynamis*, in contrast, is more of a "potential for doing, a power in its nascent state" (Farrell 63). We can see the rhetorical sense of *dynamis* within Aristotle's famous definition of rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (1355b). Grimaldi uses the following definition for *dynamis*: "that which so contains everything necessary to a thing that it can come into existence" (qtd. in Farrell *Norms* 65). Post-process theory's greatest contribution to contemporary composition scholarship remains its persistent critique

against the reduction of writing to a *techné* via the writing process paradigm. We can see in this critique a call to shift our teaching of writing from a "subject" to teaching writing as an "activity" or practice (a *dynamis*). But first, let's hear some of the valid critiques of the writing process paradigm leveled by post-process scholars.

Joseph Petraglia sums up the post-process critique in this way: "As I understand it, 'post-process' signifies a rejection of the generally formulaic framework for understanding writing that process suggested" (53). He chronicles the early research done by cognitivist researchers who sought to make a science of the writing act. He critiques the impression that research might reveal not just a fixed view of how we write but discover a particular technique which might be the best process for writing well (52). To some degree, many of us who teach using the writing process tweak our approach to the process, emphasizing this technique or that technique for different classes, seeking to find the correct formula for our students. In contrast, Petraglia's view is that "writing research (and theory) can no longer support a generic writing *techné*" (62). Nancy Blyer faults the process paradigm for two incorrect assumptions: "first, that composing is a systematic, codifiable entity we can isolate and examine; second, that understanding and mastering this codifiable entity are necessary prerequisites to learning how to write" (66). Her second assumption makes a particularly valid critique. Often adherence to the rules, forms, and proper procedures of "the" writing process becomes oppressive, as Nancy DeJoy points out. Writing becomes mediated by the process, so that either writing is determined by the process or is not considered valid unless the process is followed. This model of literacy, she believes, places students in "prescribed and prescribable notions of process" (DeJoy 176). Elizabeth Ervin complains that for her, "Process' had become an end in itself or at best a means of 'catching' students not doing... the process.

...Though I assiduously guided my students through freewriting exercises and peer review sessions, I was becoming further and further detached from the genuinely sound rationales for these practices” (190). The revolutionary insights and practices of the writing process movement when it first appeared have become reified and commodified (Russell), and become “simply a technique, a way to proceed, ten steps toward more effective writing, as easily adaptable to teaching executives at IBM as basic writers in South Brooklyn (Clifford 182). The writing process paradigm as our dominant framework for understanding the writing act had become a “subject,” a *techne*. Kathleen Welch sums up this post-process perspective on *techne*: “Many aspects of rhetoric and composition have sunk into a swamp of content devoid of their functions as faculties or abilities. Rhetoric and composition without their vital functions as faculties ultimately become trivial and boring” (94).

Classical rhetoric not only offers the same critique of *techne* as the post-process scholars make, but it also points to possibilities for teaching that don't throw *techne* and teachability completely out the window. Isocrates in his piece “Against the Sophists” complains that the sophists teach oratory as if they were teaching the rules of the alphabet: “But I marvel when I observe these men setting themselves up as instructors of youth who cannot see that they are applying the analogy of an art with hard and fast rules to a creative process” (73). Plato, similarly, rails against the sophists and their skills-based curriculum and (what he saw as) false rhetoric. At the end of the *Phaedrus*, Plato presents a handbook-like catalogue of the rules of rhetoric. He brings up such things as introductions, “bringing together in one idea the scattered particulars” (i.e. thesis), organization, and conciseness. He refers to these rules and guides as the “niceties of the art” (160). After this catalogue, Socrates makes this comment in reference to the sophists: “but my friend, see if you agree with me in thinking that their warp has gaps

in it" (160, 161). *Techne* is not enough, yet Plato does not dispense with this knowledge. Instead, he believes the knowledge of the subject of rhetoric is preliminary to being able to engage in the act of rhetoric:

Phaedrus and Socrates, we ought not to be angry, but lenient, if certain persons ...have thought, when they possessed the knowledge that is necessarily preliminary to rhetoric, that they had discovered rhetoric, and believe that by teaching these preliminaries to others they have taught them rhetoric completely. (162)

Plato makes two key points: first, knowledge of these precepts is not real rhetoric; and second, knowledge of these precepts is preliminary to rhetoric—you must know them before you can practice true rhetoric. We can see in Plato's quote the typical stance in classical rhetoric that rules and skills-based learning and practice have their place, but they are not the essence of rhetoric.

Aristotle, similarly, critiques *techne* and the reduction of rhetoric to a subject. Whereas Plato made truth (or soul) the quality that distinguished false and true rhetoric, Aristotle presents the term "practical faculty" (or practical wisdom): "But the more we try to make either dialectic or rhetoric not, what they really are, practical faculties, but sciences, the more we shall inadvertently be destroying their true nature" (187). This quote, coming from the father of the systematic analysis of rhetoric, is amazing. To reduce dialectic and rhetoric to a science (what many positivist researchers into writing in the 70s attempted) is to miss its *dynamis* within the contingent nature of reality.

Classical rhetoricians continuously debate whether rhetoric is a subject or an activity, an art or a faculty, a *techne* or a *dynamis*. Rather than answering this question with either/or, classical rhetoricians seems to affirm the stance of "both/and." Rhetoric is both a *techne* and a *dynamis*, a skill and a practical

faculty. Quintillian in his *Institutes of Oratory* presents an almost post-process denial of system and rules, yet a typical stance toward these rules as well. At the beginning of chapter XIII, the great teacher of Roman oratory says,

But let no man require of me such a system of precepts, as is laid down by most authors of *books of rules*, a system in which I should have to make certain laws, fixed by immutable necessity, for all students of eloquence... . . . For rhetoric would be a very easy and small matter, if it could be included in one short body of rules, but rules must generally be altered to suit the nature of each individual case, the time, the occasion, and necessity itself. (383)

Ironically, Quintillians *Institutes* contains many guides and rules for oratory, yet we see in this quote his post-process-like belief that the writing act is not codifiable and his denial of any *book of rules* (Theory of Writing) that transcends context and applies to all writing acts. Quintillian, though, isn't ready to throw "writing skills" and rules away: "Yet I shall not deny that it is in general of service to attend to rules, or I should not write any; but if expediency shall suggest any variance with them, we shall have to follow it, deserting the authority of teachers" (383). While denying the universal applicability of rules to each writing act, Quintillian affirms the general utility of *techne*, the knowledge of and skill with these rules.

### **What is Mastery? Can We Teach Writing?**

The issue of mastery is important to focus on because as writing teachers we work hard to help our students learn to write effectively—to "master" writing. A key tenet of post-process theory is the

denial of "mastery" and the belief that writing is unteachable. Many process teachers for years have held the common assumption that "you learn to write by writing" and that teachers orchestrate this learning by leading students through the writing process. Yet the post-process denial of teachability goes much deeper, and can undermine most writing teacher's complete sense of purpose as teachers. This section will attempt to frame the post-process perspective on mastery as the positive corrective for teaching it has the potential to be, rather than the nihilistic critique that undercuts the teaching of writing.

Based upon the assumptions that communication is thoroughly situated and thoroughly indeterminate, Kent makes the claim that discourse defies teaching. The following quote comes from his book *Paralogic Rhetoric*: "discourse production and reception cannot be reduced to discrete processes, systems, or methodologies, and, as a result, cannot be taught" (qtd. in Ewald 122). Because no absolute pattern to how we interpret as we communicate exists, because any pattern we might develop is always situated and no longer relevant to the next situation, and because "there are no codifiable processes by which we can characterize, identify, solidify, grasp discourse," teaching discourse is impossible (Dobrin 132-133). Kent, focusing again on the indeterminate and interpretive nature of communication, claims that "writing and reading—conceived broadly as processes or bodies of knowledge—cannot be taught, for nothing exists to teach" (qtd. in Breuch 99). Kent follows a form of anti-foundationalist logic:

Premise #1: All knowledge is indeterminate and interpretive, and thus cannot be taught.

Premise #2: Communication is indeterminate and interpretive.

Conclusion: Therefore, communication cannot be taught.

Here, we have the trap of post-modernism presented in syllogistic form. Stanley Fish at the end of his “Anti-Foundationalism, Theory, Hope, and the Teaching of Composition expresses this nature of post-modernist thought: “It is also the point of anti-foundationalism, which offers you nothing but the assurance that what it is unable to give you—knowledge, goals, purpose, strategies—is what you already have” (qtd. in Breuch 118). From this perspective, Breuch states no post-process pedagogical agenda is possible, and advocates (along with Petraglia) a letting go of the discipline: “instructors of writing need to let go the idea that writing is built on a foundational body of knowledge” (118). As Foster points out, this thoroughly skeptical framework for the classroom “has the effect of undermining even the best-intentioned efforts to organize the scene of writing pedagogically” (153). From this perspective, how and what are writing teachers supposed to teach?

Classical rhetoric offers interesting insights into the post-process claim against mastery. We can ask, what does post-process theory say is impossible to master? When they say “writing,” what do they mean? We hear in post-process theory’s stance the same question voiced by Cicero—Is rhetoric a science? Cicero states that if we claim that the “art of oratory” is a form of “exact knowledge,” then “there seems to be no such thing as an art of oratory” (304). The speaking/writing situation is too situated, changeable, and contingent to ever make a science of communication.

The issue of mastery becomes clearer if we return to the distinction I mentioned earlier between rhetoric as a subject or rhetoric as an activity (or faculty)—between *techne* and *dynamis*. Post-process and classical rhetoric both reject the reduction of rhetoric to a set of universally applicable set of skills and rules (*techne*). One important point needs clarification: if rhetoric is not *techne* then what is it? What does it mean to consider rhetoric as *dynamis*? Thomas Farrell views rhetoric as a practice, but a

special practice: "the aim of rhetoric is to *practice* judgment (to enact *krisis*) where certain sorts of problematic materials are concerned" (81). The classical term for this practical judgment (or wisdom) is *phronesis* which Farrell refers to as the "practical ideal of the appropriate" (81). Aristotle defines in the Nicomachean Ethics five forms of intellectual wisdom: "*sophia*—wisdom (of first principles); *episteme*—knowledge of empirical truth; *phronesis*—practical wisdom/prudence; *techne*—craft knowledge; *nous*—intuition" (Tallmon). As a form of deliberation that some critics believe includes the emotions, *phronesis* brings practical reasoning and judgment to bear upon uncertain, contingent, and specific situations (Schwarze, Abizadeh). Phronesis, as James Gaulte defines it, is "the flexible interpretive capacity that enables moral reasoners to determine the best action to take when knowledge depends on circumstances." *Phronesis* has the characteristic of a "master quality" because practical wisdom or prudential judgment "makes possible the proper exercise of the other virtues" (Farrell Norms 98). *Phronesis* differs from *techne* which is a craft or skill that might be applied mechanically to a task without the ability to change tactics based upon the demands of the situation. As Michael Calvin McGee points out, "*Phronesis* presents an aspect of wisdom missing in *techne*" ("2. Phronesis"). It differs from *episteme* because no fixed knowledge of how to judge within contingent situations is possible. Certain knowledge is not what *phronesis* is about, but *phronesis* can enact or bring into experience this knowledge: "In Aristotle's architectonic, the transformation of the *episteme* of ethics into the *phronesis* of ethics is the business of rhetoric (which is to say, in truncated terms, rhetoric is the bridge between philosophy and politics)" (McGee "2. Phronesis"). It is the business of rhetoric to translate the knowledge of what is right or wrong into the actual application of that knowledge in real life. Rhetoric,

then, through its enactment of practical wisdom and judgment translates theory into practice.

*Phronesis*, as Steve Schwarze points out, is crucial to the practice of rhetoric: "the relationship of *phronesis* and rhetoric emphasizes how rhetor, text, and audience are brought together in the enactment of practical wisdom" ("The role of display in *phronesis*").

We can see in a number of places the value classical rhetoricians placed on *phronesis*. Isocrates in the *Antidosis* puts a high value on what he calls "conjecture": "For since it is not in the nature of man to attain a science by the possession of which we can know positively what we should do or what we should say, in the next resort I hold that man to be wise who is able by his powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course" (77). Quintillian voices a similar value on *phronesis*, though he uses the term "discretion": "rules must generally be altered to suit the nature of each individual case, the time, the occasion, and necessity itself; consequently, one great quality in an orator is discretion, because he must turn his thought in various directions, according to the different bearings of his subject" (383). Elaborating on his definition of the orator as "a good man skilled in speaking," Quintillian places special emphasis on *phronesis*: "no man, unless he be good, can be an orator. To an orator discernment and prudence are necessary" (413). As Victoria Kahn also points out, for Cicero the faculty of prudence was inseparable from the orator (35). Within the specific circumstance of any occasion for speaking, and dealing with a subject matter that is uncertain and open to doubt, the rhetor must seek not just any path but the best or the most appropriate response. Hence, this sense of judgment is associated with virtue and the good. This sense of appropriateness and virtue within *phronesis* can also be seen in Michael Leff's elaboration of the classical meaning of *decorum* and how it influences practical judgment:

Decorum is the term that best describes the process of mediation and balance connected with qualitative judgment. It is the principle of decorum that allows us to comprehend a situation as a whole, to locate its meaning within a context, and to translate this understanding into discursive form that becomes an incentive to action. ... Decorum, then, is the principle of action that accounts for the adaptive power of persuasive discourse. (62)

As McGee points out, Aristotle's entire critique of sophistic rhetoric and his attempt to reconstitute rhetoric is a renewed emphasis on the promotion of *phronesis* ("2. Phronesis"). For Aristotle's rhetoric was first and foremost an activity, a practice (a *dynamis* and not just *techné*): "Aristotle presents his practice as a powerful capacity (*dynamis*) that must be defined in thought before it can be enacted and enacted in order to exist" (Farrell Norms 65). *Phronesis* enacts rhetoric just as rhetoric reveals *phronesis*, for rhetoric is the faculty (the practical wisdom) to observe in any communication situation the appropriate discourse.

It's clear that what post-process scholars emphasize is the importance of this practical judgment within communication. They consider writing almost exclusively in its *dynamis* form. That is what they mean when they say writing is thoroughly situated and thoroughly interpretive—it requires the application of deliberative reasoning and judgment (i.e. lots of interpretation) within contingent situations. As we return to the question of mastery, we can see that when the post-process scholars say writing is unteachable they mean *phronesis* is unteachable. Aristotle and other classical rhetoricians would agree—to a degree.

### What Then Can We Teach?

The crux of post-process theory lies in its assertion (voiced also by classical rhetoricians) that rhetoric must be seen as a phronetic practice and not a *techné* or skill. How then do we teach *phronesis*? How do we as teachers with a class full of students looking at us to teach them how to write promote the enactment of practical wisdom within uncertain, contingent situations? Once again, classical rhetoric offers a corrective, I believe, to the post-modern agenda behind post-process theory. This corrective hinges on whether and how *phronesis* can at least be cultivated.

*Phronesis*, in fact, is used by Lyotard as a term to describe what he calls the post-modern paralogic situation (otherwise known as contingency). Shaun Gallagher presents and then critiques Lyotard's reinterpretation of Aristotle's sense of the word *phronesis*:

*Phronesis* involves a dialectics which requires judging "case by case," "because each situation is singular" and there are no external criteria to guide judgment (*Just Gaming* 27). From case to case the mean is redefined in practical wisdom. "When one says: in every instance, choose the mean, it means for Aristotle, that his mean cannot be determined in itself, that is, outside of the situation in which we find it" (*JG* 27). Thus, the prescriptions one gets through *phronesis* are what Lyotard might call "dangling prescriptives" (*JG* 59)—i.e., they are not grounded on theoretical descriptions, but are developed "case by case." (qtd. in Gallagher "Lyotard on Paralogy and *Phronesis*").

From a post-modern perspective, no "system" can guide this judgment. When post-process scholars use Davidson's idea of "triangulation" within the communicative interaction and voice the need for

"hermeneutic guessing," they obviously depend upon this view of "dangling *phronesis*" talked about by Lyotard. To use my analogy of the blind man again, here we have the blind man seeking his way within a different location at every moment—seeking through his sixth sense of *phronesis*. Kent backs away from an absolutely dangling situation by describing "shortcuts" taken within communication, but still no "knowledge" derived from this contingent situation can be applied to the next situation. Because *phronesis* is dangling and has no possible anchor, it is by definition impossible to teach. Yet Gallagher questions the dangling nature of *phronesis* because it would reduce *phronesis* to mere cleverness:

Lyotard goes so far in this direction as to deny an essential Aristotelian dimension of *phronesis*, namely, that *phronesis* depends upon education or on *hexis*, a habit of virtue, an *ethos*. Although both Lyotard and Aristotle would agree that there is no theory or method that explicitly defines *phronesis*, and that *phronesis* is not a trained ability, they would disagree about the proper educational background for *phronesis*. *Phronesis*, according to Aristotle, requires education, a knowledge of particulars which come from experience... . This formation of the right *ethos* in experience—I call it the educational backdrop of *phronesis*—is precisely what Lyotard denies. ("Lyotard on Paralogy and *Phronesis*")

The anti-foundationalist tendencies of post modernism, evident in post process theory, reduces *phronesis* to cleverness and a form of inventiveness and game playing. What is missing, significantly, is the notion of ethics or virtue other than winning the game. It seems that this form of "practical wisdom" potentially leads to a form of sophistry that Plato would certainly condemn.

Many classical rhetoricians highlight the educational backdrop for *phronesis* in rhetoric. To appropriately apply *phronesis* within the rhetorical situation takes education, as Isocrates believes:

But to choose from these elements those which should be employed for each subject, to join them together, to arrange them properly, and also, not to miss what the occasion demands but appropriately to adorn the whole speech with striking thoughts and to clothe it in flowing and melodious phrases—these things, I hold, require much study.

(74)

As we saw before, Plato believed the "niceties of the art" were preliminaries to the art, but not the art itself. The rhetor needed to learn these skills before they were able to engage in productive rhetoric or dialectic (161). Cicero is the one who most strongly voices the importance of a broad education for the orator or rhetorician. At one point, he deals specifically with the use of systematic knowledge derived about oratory—is it really necessary? He states,

If however the actual things noticed in the practice and conduct of speaking have been heeded and recorded by men of skill and experience, if they have been defined in terms, illuminated by classification, and distributed under subdivisions—and I see that it has been possible to do this—I do not understand why this should not be regarded as an art, perhaps not in that precise sense of the term. (304)

We might wonder if Cicero had Aristotle in mind here. Perhaps rhetoric is not a science, but experience can provide knowledge based from experience to guide us. Cicero's view is that we must pay attention to this "art": "whether this be an art, or only something like an art, assuredly it is not to be

disdained" (304). Cicero goes on to assert that the orator needs extensive learning and that "there is also a certain practical training that you must undergo" (309). From this perspective, Breuch and Petraglia's "letting go" of the discipline (this disdain of the art) would be unwise.

The question, then, for the post-process critique of the writing process paradigm is how do we as teachers teach writing without it becoming a *techne*? How do we foster the development of *phronesis* and writing as a practice and not get caught up in teaching writing as a subject? Post-process scholars remind us, correctly, that knowing what the writing process is and how to perform it does not mean one knows how to write effectively. What do we do with *teche*, with all those rules and skills that Plato believed were preliminary to the art of rhetoric?

Joseph Petraglia believes the goal of writing instruction should be the "turn away from developing rhetorical skills and toward development of rhetorical sensibilities" (62). Summing up ideas from Roderick Hart and Don Burks in the field of speech communication, Petraglia states: "the ideal rhetorical training will have at its core the development of *sensitivity* to the rhetorical possibilities available to students and will provide some guidance as to how they may determine to select among those possibilities" (62). Rather than the goal being the production of rhetorical texts, he believes teachers should encourage rhetorical sensitivity. Certainly we can see that the sensitivity to and selection of possibilities is an expression of practical wisdom—of *phronesis*.

I agree that teaching rhetorical sensitivity should be the primary goal of writing instruction; however, we are left, still, with the task of reconciling rhetorical skill (*techne*) and rhetorical sensitivity (*phronesis*). This question, I believe, is the heart of answering how post-process theories of composition

can provide guidance to teachers who may not know or be disposed to his theories. Two key answers exist.

First, *techne* needs *phronesis* (and *phronesis* needs *techne*). The valid critique of the process paradigm offered by post-process scholars is the same one that Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle had for the Sophists—rhetoric is more than mere *techne*. Post-process scholars would "let go" the teaching of writing as a subject because for them the writing situation is so unique that no previous knowledge helps with one's "hermeneutical guessing." However, post-process theory seeks to develop *dynamis* with no recourse to *techne*. However, Gallagher reaffirms the position of classical rhetoric that rhetoric is the phronetic application of *techne* within contingent situations—*phronesis* depends upon education. Rhetorical sensitivity is enhanced by the study of the subject of rhetoric. It is important, then, for teachers to review effective techniques and procedures for writing—the value of freewriting, for instance, or different approaches for writing introductions—but students should not be left with the idea that they now have a formula for writing which they can mechanically apply in each writing situation. These skills must then be applied in situational responses.

The second answer should help teachers avoid reducing writing to formula (*techne*) and help them develop their students' *phronesis*. Thomas Farrell has pondered this question extensively, and believes he finds his answer in Aristotle: "The question naturally arises, how is *phronesis* to be cultivated? Here Aristotle suggests that deliberation about choice and action is the way to cultivate this superordinate virtue. ...It can only be advocacy of ethos, pathos, and logos which provides the initiative and hence the opportunity for ordinary people to transform themselves through choice, action, and proper judgment" (Farrell *Norms* 99). Farrell also points to Aristotle to affirm that rhetoric is a

"relational art"—that is it is performed and enacted only within the presence of others. He creates the notion of the "rhetorical forum" which he describes as a gathering place for discourse ("Practicing" 88). It is within the rhetorical forum that students share their writing and practice making judgments: "the rhetorical forum provides a potential normative horizon, an avenue of mediation among discourses that might otherwise be self-contained, incommensurable or perhaps not even heard at all. ... It is the rhetorical forum that allows the plurality of appearances to be presented, witnessed and regarded, qualified and subverted by the perspectives of others" ("Practicing" 89). Farrell goes on to describe the dynamics of the rhetorical forum and how its normalizing affect generates *phronesis*:

In what we understand as its "normalized" condition, the rhetorical forum provides a loose but recognizable admission criteria as to who may speak, what may be spoken about, and how we might be held accountable for what we say and do. In a very general sense, each of these sets of constraints may be subsumed under the large category of the *appropriate*, perhaps the closest congruence we have between emancipatory reason and *phronesis*. However, a rhetorical sense of the appropriate would identify norms that are more specific than universal validity claims. ... Instead of presupposing the appropriate as an *a priori* validity claim in advance of speech, *rhetorical practice enacts the norms of propriety collaboratively with interested collective others* ("Practice" 90, 91).

It is within the rhetorical forum that *phronesis*—the norms of propriety and judgment—is developed.

We can see in Farrell's call for the rhetorical forum and the role he sees it playing where "rhetoric is both the animated and the animator" the post-process call for "communicative interaction." One of the three main characteristics of writing, according to Kent, is that writing is public (1). Helen

Rothschild Ewald believes communicative interaction is the most obvious post-process pedagogy (130). She thinks that through more student-to-student interaction teachers can promote a "transactional" rather than "transmission" model of learning (128). Donna Qualley would call this kind of learning a matter of achieving "earned insights" rather than receiving "ready-made truths" (35). Since post-process theory rejects any foundation for knowledge in *techné*, it leans heavily on communicative interaction to engender *phronesis*: "Post-process scholars embrace a theory of communicative interaction as hermeneutic and paralogic, where meaning making... is viewed as a 'collaborative, dialogic, and thoroughly public activity' (Kent, *Paralogic Rhetoric* 68)" (Blyler 75). Such a constructivist approach to learning is not new, as witnessed by the learning theories of Bruffee and Vygotsky, but what is different about the post-process view of communicative interaction is that it seeks to achieve *phronesis* without any grounding in *techné*. Becoming better hermeneutical guessers (and thus more "wise" and effective communicators), in the post-process view, occurs through repeated instances of communicative interaction with peers and audience.

Whether we adopt the post-modern tenets of post-process theory, or see them in light of classical rhetoric, we can see that the significant quality of *phronesis* in rhetoric is developed through this communicative interaction. That means as teachers we need, as Quintillian urges, to question students about their judgments in writing (375). We need not only to have students engage in writing for each other (thus creating a rhetorical forum), but we need to have them discuss and question their choices in writing amongst each other. They need to critique where they see communication working and where it is not together. Through this shared discourse, this dialectic exchange, students learn the practice of writing.

## Conclusion

This investigation of post-process theory in light of classical rhetoric has not touched on all the aspects of post-process' potential new directions for teaching. My focus has been to explain and temper post-process theory's alienating post-modern roots by showing connections it has with classical rhetoric's own critique of *techné* and its call for *phronesis* in rhetoric. With this tempered view, writing teachers may find themselves pursuing new post-process directions. For both post-process theory and classical rhetoric seek to redeem rhetoric to a practical art:

Rhetoric is held in the lowest regard when it is identified solely with the productive domain: sham enthymemes, slippery slogans, feel-good sound-bites. It is not until we think of the two-sided argument, the running controversy, the ritual that becomes a crisis: in other words, not until we admit the liminal elements of struggle, difference, and thus reflective judgment that rhetoric is redeemed. (Farrell "Practice" 85).

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