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English 5364, Fall 2006

December 4, 2006

Open Spaces: A Heuristic Toward a New Composition

Introduction

Near the end of her book *A Pedagogy of Possibility*, Kay Halasek asks the question that frames this discussion: "How do we move beyond the constructs that now dominate our thinking in composition studies? (176). I would expand the question: How do we move beyond the practices that now dominate the way we teach composition? These questions, of course, are not new and have been asked since the revival of rhetoric in the mid-twentieth century and the pioneers of rhetoric and composition became aware that composition as it has been taught in American colleges and universities is not rhetoric and is, in fact, "perversely opposed to rhetoric" (Crowley 167). But should composition be more hospitable to rhetoric? Speaking in 1936, I.A. Richards conjectured that rhetoric should be dismissed to Limbo as irrelevant "unless we can find reason for believing that it can become a study that will minister successfully to important needs" (106). I believe rhetoric can find a home inside our freshman composition classes because it does meet important needs. Current composition remains a pedagogy of demonstration, but I ascribe to Halasek and Kathleen Welch's view that writing instruction today be based upon a conception of writing as dialogue and performance. As teachers I

believe that we must construct "classrooms that engage students in examining and understanding the contingencies and politics of language and encourage them to claim a language of their own" (Halasek 176). But how do we construct such a classroom? How do we move toward a New Composition? Rather than provide principles and specifics detailing the answers to these questions, I prefer to offer a heuristic. This heuristic presents a number of spaces (or topics) into which teachers can take their teaching practice that will prompt them to invent their own answers to precise methods and curriculum for this New Composition.

The Catalyst for a New Composition

Before I proceed, I feel it is important to reveal the subjectivities from which I write. Although written as a paper for a course in Contemporary Rhetoric, I am reaching out to teachers like me who may be seeking some other way to teach writing—who, in fact, may feel an ethical compulsion to transform their practice. Let me share briefly the two personal stances that underlie my convictions in this paper. First, I strongly believe that we need to increase the "rhetorical literacy" of the general American population, and that means we need to be teaching what Richard's articulated as the goal of a revived rhetoric: "I have urged that there is room for a persistent, systematic, detailed inquiry into how words work" (111). We must help our students learn how words work--how language works. I believe it is important that we teach how language shapes perceptions and sanctions the actions of power. My conviction comes from the current state of public discourse in the United States. I feel somewhat like Wayne Booth did in *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* when he surveyed the divisive rhetoric surrounding the Vietnam War and expressed: "my concern is with a befouled rhetorical climate which

prevents our meeting to discover and pursue common interests" (1499). I have watched in dismay the twisting of language that has led our country into actions and positions I never could have dreamed. Politicians, talk show hosts, and citizens have become so entrenched in their beliefs that they talk at each other and forgo understanding. An appreciation of "how language works" and how language is used to shape these beliefs and actions is urgently needed to avoid what I consider catastrophic abuses of power. As Booth later mentions in the preface of his 2004 book *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, "Since we are flooded daily with rhetoric, admirable and contemptible, we are in desperate need of serious rhetorical study, everywhere" (ix). That includes the composition classroom where rhetoric is seldom seen.

The second catalyst for this discussion is my own recent awareness that after seventeen years of teaching freshman composition I am still entrenched in modernist (what Crowley calls current-traditional) epistemologies and teaching practices. Despite my own self-image as a teacher who employs epistemic, social-constructionist (what Berlin calls transactional) practices, the bottom line is I am still confined within current-traditionalism. As Sharon Crowley writes, "current-traditional pedagogy is not instruction in writing. It is instruction in a theory of composition. These are two very different things" (148). The reason for this persistence of modernist pedagogy is the easy way in which alternative pedagogies—from process to expressivist to social constructionist—become subsumed within the current-traditionalist paradigm. Many scholars have noted the fact of this assimilation, but quotes from just two will highlight what I mean. Halasek in discussing the main unit of current-traditional pedagogy—the paragraph—provides this explanation:

The arrival of process pedagogy during the 1960s and 1970s, and social epistemic pedagogies in the 1980s and 1990s, which together proved powerful enough to redefine

the very nature of composition pedagogy, had little effect on instruction in paragraphing and quotation. ... What remains problematic, of course, is that instruction in these elements of composition remained tied to current-traditional objectivist (even scientific) notions of language, reality, and knowledge. (145)

Halasek's point is that even after the influences of poststructuralism, writing teachers remain attached to the paragraph as conceived by Alexander Bain in the 19th century as a "collection of sentences with unity of purpose" (qtd. in Halasek 149). David Bartholomae, commenting on our unexamined practice, characterizes our attachment to current practices as a secret we guardedly remain silent about:

...we are extraordinarily hesitant to argue about what writing is good and what is bad, what is worth doing and what is not; where we can talk for hours about empowering writers without raising the fundamental questions of power as they are represented in discourse. We move the furniture, collaborate on electronic networks, take turns being the boss, but we do not change writing. It is the same old routine. (16)

For me, this "same old routine" revolves around teaching the expository essay (I call it the "critical essay"¹) which has an introduction, body, and conclusion and each paragraphs develops a single support for the thesis. I am motivated in writing this paper to open new spaces, new possibilities, for my own teaching practice, and this paper is offered to other teachers who may have this same desire.

Two Key Constraints

The conception of a New Composition must work against two powerful constraints. The first constraint involves the conceptual frameworks we use for understanding our classroom pedagogy.

Halasek takes particular aim at Berlin's taxonomy as expressed in his book *Rhetoric and Reality*: "The structure of Berlin's taxonomy compels writing teachers to align themselves with particular camps—objectivist, expressivist, or transactionalist. Yet, in practice, most writing teachers rely on elements of all three approaches in their pedagogies" (176). We are, as Sherry Gradin says, "trapped by the language of category and dichotomy" (qtd. in Halasek 176). In my own experience, aligning myself within these categories leads me to see myself as an enlightened transactionalist and scorn the practice of teachers who employ objectivist practices like taking students to the grammar lab to work drill-and-kill exercises on the computers. The hypocritical truth is, however, that I employ objectivist and expressivist teaching practices as well. Halasek believes that we must move beyond these categories and dichotomies because she says, "[We] are, in effect, confined by the structures that define the discipline, just as the discipline has, in the past, been confined by the process/product models, subjective/objective dichotomies, and student-and teacher-centered classroom constructs" (176). Welch believes we must transcend "the false binary opposition of the public and the private" (72). In addition, the significant binary opposition between academic writing and out-of-school/workplace writing provides many teachers with the justification for maintaining modernist writing forms to the exclusion of other writing genres. Conceived as oppositional binaries, we place ourselves in limiting, confrontational positions needlessly. To enact New Composition, I believe we must adopt the awareness of the "rhetoricity of all discourse" and make this awareness the basis of our teaching (Fish 1624).

Bartholomae mentions that he is "increasingly drawn to the metaphor of space when talking about writing" (14), and I believe it is this conception of writing within context and situation that is a crucial way to work beyond the constraints of previous conceptions of writing instruction. Halasek's post-

modern "pedagogy of the possible" is framed in spacial terms: "So, rather than define our discipline along taxonomic lines, I propose an alternative architectonics informed by dialogue and the performative nature of pedagogy—the interanimated acts and scenes of teaching and learning" (176). The heuristic of New Composition, in fact, represent locations within space and time ("interanimated acts and scenes") from which we can conceive different ways of writing and teaching.

The second constraint deserves special attention, and that is the narrow conception of writing in the composition classroom. Kathleen Welch faults the discipline of English for privileging interpretation and stopping there: "as if interpretation will automatically lead to a different interaction with the world" (96). She looks to Isocrates to reject "the idea that language is a container that hold meaning, a ubiquitous attitude toward language in U.S. culture" (41). She refers to this belief as the content/form binary. Since thought is separate and precedes language, writing's most important function is to transmit that thought as clearly and accurately to the audience as possible (hence the emphasis on surface correctness and clarity). Halasek uses the term "proficiency" to label the kind of writing that has privileged status in composition. She defines proficiency this way: "an assumption of certainty; emphasis on centripetal cultural and polemic rhetorical ends; passive reception of knowledge and authoritative reception of discourse; instruction in and production of normal discourse; an overriding concern for convention and form" (178). Sharon Crowley is harsher, calling this composition writing "anti-writing": "current-traditional pedagogy anticipates the composing process, dictates its progress before it even begins. It stands in for writing; ... This sort of prose establishes no voice, selects no audience, takes no stand, makes no commitment" (148, 149). Furthermore, she states: "the current-traditional traditional theory of invention elides differences among rhetorical situations, denies the location of any rhetorical act in a given community, and transfers discursive authority away

from individual rhetors and onto the academy" (167). As Catherine Hobbs notes, "the rhetoric of modernism has been classified as *managerial rhetoric*" whose watchword is control (19). To be sure, Crowley is unduly harsh upon this kind of rhetoric. This kind of writing is rhetorical—it has an audience, situation, and purpose—but as Andrea Lundsford had noted, it is a narrow definition of writing established for academic purposes (142). Chris Thaiss and Terry Zawacki in their recent book *Engaging Writers & Dynamic Disciplines* establish three common features of academic writing:

1. Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study.
2. The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception
3. An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response.

Of these three features, it is the last two—the dominance of logical proofs (and inartistic proofs) and the narrowing of audience and situation to the classroom—that Crowley and other's see as overly constricted and unethical. Welch complains that this conception of writing reduces "writing to a mere skill, craft, or useful tool" (145). As a tool, its predominant use is to demonstrate and transmit knowledge or learning. Welch is more critical, saying this writing "constitutes the removal of student-written language from the larger public arena. The removal reinforces the common, dualistic idea that students live outside ideology if they choose to do so, just as they live outside language if they choose to do so" (145).

As teachers of freshman composition, we must work within an academic context, but that does not mean we must limit our instruction to only academic discourse. To accept the rhetoricity of all

discourse means we might help our students examine the assumptions upon which academic writing is founded. By teaching them to write in expanded rhetorical situations, we will teach them what Joseph Petraglia calls "rhetorical sensitivity" which enables them to understand the specific contexts and requirements of all discourse better, including academic discourse. In the view of Roderick Hart and Don Burks, "the ideal rhetorical training will have at its core the development of a *sensitivity* to the rhetorical possibilities available to students and will provide some guidance as to how they may determine to select among those possibilities" (Petraglia 62). Halasek, in fact, positions the term "productivity" as a companion to "proficiency." The dynamic between proficiency and productivity represents a continuum of monologic to dialogic, centripetal to centrifugal, modernist to post-modernist discourse. Similar to Condillac's dual rhetorical system which oscillated between mechanistic and ana-logic discourse, Halasek's conception of proficiency and productivity allows for an interanimation and hybridity between the two. As writing teachers we do not have to make an either/or choice between academic writing and non-academic writing. To expand our possibilities for writing, we don't have to abandon the thesis sentence and the expository essay, but it should mean we help our students interrogate the rhetoric behind this form of discourse, and most importantly we expand the range of writing that students do in our classes.

The Purpose and Function of the Heuristic: A Pentad for New Composition

Ann Bertoff in her introduction to the selections from Richard's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* makes this comment about efforts to establish a "New Rhetoric": "Most New Rhetorics fade quickly because they are focused too narrowly or they are co-opted, serving only to revivify what they aimed to

supplant" (84). She goes on to say that Richards conceived his New Rhetoric as a heuristic. Following Richard's example, I would like to present these five "spaces" as heuristics: that is, they are rhetorical locations in which teachers and their pedagogy can inhabit and invent new practice. Adopting any one of these five should have profound affects on the pedagogy and learning going on in a writing classroom. The heuristic is not meant to define particular pedagogical practices, but instead is meant to place teachers in different positionalities that lead them to construct new pedagogies that fit their situation. The lines between these spaces are not absolute and in many ways they interanimate each other, nor do they exclude each other. The heuristics are also scalable. By that I mean that each space is open to a tentative colonization or a full settlement, according to the teacher's preferences or the constraints of his or her classroom setting. For example, the Rhetorical Forum could be a discourse community as narrow as the students in the class or it could be as broad as the community in MySpace. Similarly, opening to genre's could go as far as new media, multi-modal compositions to alternative print-based genres. These heuristics are also scalable for implementation at all levels of writing from middle to secondary to the college composition classroom. Finally, these heuristics are not a complete list, but represent strategic choices I believe will have the most impact.

Each of the heuristics, however, are grounded in a thoroughly rhetorical view of writing. These rhetorical principles are well-articulated by Sharon Crowley:

1. "rhetoric pays close attention to the given audience, occasion, and social or political situation that has prompted a rhetor to compose and deliver a discourse" (166)
2. "rhetoric tends to prefer a more holistic picture of human motivation than has been traditionally congenial to philosophy" (166-167). In other words, beyond

appeals to reason, rhetoric is open to ethos, pathos, and knowledge built from common places.

3. "rhetoricians tend to view language as something other than a simple medium of representation. ... Language is not always a subservient instrument of thought or reason; indeed, it may shape both" (167).

These three views underly the awareness of the rhetoricity of all discourse and constitute essential understandings for productively exploring the heuristics for a New Composition.

Open Spaces: Heuristics for a New Composition

Heuristic #1: Open Genre/New Literacy

The first heuristic calls on teachers to explore new genres with their students. When students compose within a different genre, they are transported into a different rhetorical space. Carolyn Miller in "Genre as Social Action" defines genres "as typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (159). She looks to Kenneth Burke's notion of scene to stress the influence of situation: "An account of the relationship between rhetoric and situation that thus empowers external, objective elements of situation is a theory that in Kenneth Burke's terms, features scene above any other source of motive" (156). Rhetorical situations recur, and out of this recurrence particular forms of writing have evolved to meet these situations or scenes. Bakhtin states it well: "*The immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine—and determine from within, so to speak—the structure of an utterance*" [italics his emphasis] (1215). Making the connection between discourse communities and genre's, John Swales says, "[discourse communities are] sociorhetorical networks that form in order to

work towards common set goals. ... Genres belong to discourse communities, not to individuals" (qtd. in Thaiss and Zawacki 17-18). As teachers, that means we allow students to enter alternative rhetorical situations than presenting an interpretation of Hamlet to a teacher. It means we enter our students into a discourse community where they attempt to do something with their writing. We must help students understand the landscape of the situation and guide them in making choices for what form their writing will take. Ultimately, it means that we teach them that no writing is genre-less or free of rhetorical implications. Thaiss and Zawacki look to a later essay by Miller that appears in *Genre and the New Rhetoric* to make this same point: "genres—because they are socially and culturally determined—must be 'tied to an analysis of power' and taught as 'culturally contingent forms (x)" (18). To expand the possibilities of genre choices for our students—and interrogate motives and situations that shape them—will by itself lead to significant changes in the teaching and learning within a composition classroom.

However, to expand genres in our classroom is to go against powerful motives of the academy. Chiefly the academy values "epistemic" writing (for students to show learning) and acts to "sort and rank" students based on how well they create sanctioned genres (Thaiss and Zawacki 17). As significant as these motives are, they come at a cost as Crowley points out: "As a result of its emphasis on the communication of knowledge, then, current-traditional pedagogy tended to overlook a panoply of discursive genres" (156). She goes on to quote a 19th century commentator on the greatest cost of this myopic focus on academic writing: "The broader ethical, aesthetic and social imports of the power of verbal expression are generally ignored" (qtd. in 156). We can no longer afford to produce two-dimensional writers who know only one way of writing and are blind to the significant ways in which

language works beyond showing learning and getting a grade. Patricia Bizzell has examined this question of alternative genres within the academy in her book *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. Thaiss and Zawacki summarize her prospects for alternative genres and how they might fit within the academy: "She is optimistic about the potential for 'hybrid forms'... --to the extent that they accomplish valued intellectual work—to blend with other discourses 'to produce new forms with their own organic integrity' (ix)" (19). Certainly, we can justify the use of different genres and the interrogations of rhetorical choices in relation to genre as "valued intellectual work."

Most importantly, we must open our classroom to genre's that reflect the new literacy of electronic communication. It makes no sense to limit the study and production of discourse to print-text when the "scene" of 21st discourse occurs increasingly in radio, TV, and the internet. Writing happens in all these electronic mediums, so these mediums must have a place too in our writing classroom. Kathleen Welch in 1999 expressed the imperative for this new "electric rhetoric" well (which she calls "Next Rhetoric"):

With the widespread use of television and the computer, literacy, both functional and critical, has changed radically. Next Rhetoric has arrived, and it is imperative for the humanities/posthumanities/literacies to take account of this new Sophistic *logos* performance, which includes the new deployment of the written word and graphical representations. (209-210)

Ian Jukes and Ted McCain believe a "fundamental shift in the basic paradigm of teaching ... is required to prepare students for the new technological world" (1). It used to be that you were considered literate if you could read and interpret a magazine article. Literacy is different today, as David Warlick points

out: "In 2003, however, that article more likely appears as a Web page, and that article about Martin Luther King, Jr. may well have been written by a white supremacist. ... Literacy for our students must also address changes in what information looks like, the technologies of viewing it, how it works, and how we use it." I.A. Richards' call for an increased study of "how words work" today means studying how words and images and sounds work in mediated settings. We must move beyond print-based genres.

In *Delivering College Composition: The Fifth Canon*, Marvin Diogenes and Andrea Lundsford discuss their experience converting their composition classes to a "new media" writing classrooms. They describe a new "secondary literacy" that is a necessary corollary to Walter Ong's concept of "secondary orality" (142). They were drawn to make this change in how they teach composition by the prevalence of this secondary literacy: "It is our contention that this new literacy requires us to develop and make available to our students expanded definitions of writing" (142). Having students create "mediated writing" that incorporates text, sounds, and images in multi-modal compositions, they note, shifts composition away from "regularized" writing to writing that is more performative in nature (143). Most significantly, Diogenes and Lundsford encountered far-reaching changes as a result of this shift:

Indeed, we have learned that delivering composition based on a substantive redefinition of writing affects every aspect of our work: our theories of writing, our curriculum, classroom configurations, staffing, training, evaluation principles and procedures, relationships with other programs, and methods and materials. (151)

Writing beyond the print page necessarily draws teachers and students to explore new genre possibilities, and as we can see from these authors' experience, it has plenty of other impacts. Genres of

electronic, mediated writing may be more hybrid and fluid in nature, but they exist and represent the core "new literacy" we must help our students learn to write and read.

Heuristic #2: The Rhetorical Forum

The second location in this heuristic is the "rhetorical forum." I am taking the term from Thomas B. Farrell who gained his original suggestion of it from the work of Stephen Toulmin and associates in *An Introduction to Reasoning*: "a rhetorical 'forum' is a more or less formal location, where types of reasoning and argument are practiced" ("Practicing" 88). A rhetorical forum is a "place" where a discourse community (or communities) can gather to communicate. Farrell points to law courts and the United Nations General Assembly as highly structured and developed rhetorical forums ("*Norms*" 282). He defines a rhetorical forum broadly this way: "A rhetorical forum is any encounter setting sufficiently durable to serve as a recurring 'gathering place' for discourse. As such, the forum provides a space for multiple expressed positions to encounter one another. And in its most developed condition, the forum may also provide precedents and modalities for granting a hearing to positions, as well as sorting among their agendas and constituencies" ("Practicing" 89). Entering our students into a rhetorical forum fits with post-process pedagogical thinking which believes writing should be public, thoroughly situated, and involve "communicative interaction." This communicative interaction, Helen Ewald explains, is dialogic in nature (128). As Bakhtin has noted, the word is a "two-sided act" that is a verbal performance with the addressee: "As word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*" (1215). The social context shapes the formation of understanding: "*Any true understanding is dialogic in nature. ... Meaning does not reside in the word... . Meaning is the effect of interaction between speaker and listener...*" (Bakhtin 1226). The

rhetorical forum becomes a place where students can experience a more expansive understanding of audience than the academic context where the teacher (or class peers) serve the only audience.

But the rhetorical forum exerts a stronger influence than just the shaping of meaning—it shapes the discourse itself. In "The Challenge of Contingency: Process and the Turn to Social in Composition," David Foster voices the important impact the social context and contingency has on student writing: "Writing becomes a meaningful event ... because [the writer] reads the situation and the reader accurately and finds ways to adapt her language to the contingent requirements of the writing moment" (153). Farrell is more specific, saying that the rhetorical forum generates what he calls "norms of propriety": "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*. In the rhetorical occasion, rhetoric is both the animated and the animator. This is because the very conditions of propriety are continually being reindividuated and renewed with every specific case" (*Norms* 289). Students write not just for the teacher, but within and for a social setting that impacts the choices they make about everything they do as writers. It is within the rhetorical forum that *phronesis*—the norms of propriety and judgment—is developed. Most importantly, the social context of the rhetorical forum establishes the grounds for writing as dialogue and performance, for writing in the rhetorical forum always contains within it the possibility (even the requirement) of response. Kathleen Welch agrees and expresses the powerful potential of electric rhetoric (rhetorical forums within digital environments) because students "have the opportunity to walk outside the prison of the modernist form/content universe and enter into a world in which informed performance is a new

community action" (136)². In many ways, this kind of communication within rhetorical forums like MySpace or blogs is what our students are already doing.

Heuristic #3: Real Writing

The third heuristic involves putting students into real writing situations where they are writing for real audiences—that is, creating texts that perform some real action toward an audience outside the classroom. Service Learning represents one model successfully used by many writing teachers to help make writing more real for students. Although, as Halasek points out, teachers remain evaluators as the "audience behind the audience," teachers by positioning students in real communication situations help them understand the basic function of rhetoric: "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (Burke 1337). Douglas Park is one scholar who insists on the importance of having students write for real audiences in real situations, putting emphasis on the real social setting: "A 'social setting' must exist, Park argues, in which writer, audience, and discourse will interact with particular goals and functions; the audience must exist as part of the broader social context of an 'institution or social relationship,' and the discourse produced must 'perform [an understood function] within that social relationship' "(Halasek 56).

Students placed in real writing situations will by necessity be called upon to think more deeply about what they are doing with their writing. I.A. Richards notions of "acteevity" and "feedforward" present one way of understanding the impact this writing context has for students. As Richards says, "all acteevity depends on, and is made into acteevity, by feedforward" (225). Here "acteevity" represents the students' act of writing, and "feedforward" is the exigencies of the real writing context. The interaction between the two creates what Richards calls a feedforward system that has its most

important influence on *design*: "the flexible fitting of means to ends" (226). Students will be called upon to find (to design) the best means—whether it involves genre choices, content, or other rhetorical considerations—to achieve the particular end(s) they have toward their audience. Thaiss and Zawacki suggest one other significant impact a real writing context may have on students. If we suppose that real writing can become writing that matters more to students, then it may generate better writing: "good writing ... grows out of a writer's sense that the work he or she is doing matters, both professionally and personally" (136). This real writing may also matter more to students if they are able to select and take ownership of their real writing tasks.

Heuristic #4: Collaboration

The fourth heuristic is to have students compose texts together. This co-creation of a shared texts works against important modernist notions, particularly the notion of the sovereign authoring subject, that Crowley says is no longer useful for the teaching of composition (xiv). Bakhtin was drawn to the way Socrates had students collaboratively search for the nature of truth: "[for] truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the progress of their dialogic interaction" (qtd. in Halasek 182). Collaborative writing is not new in composition—Kenneth Bruffee being the chief theorist in this area—and it is not without its drawbacks and difficulties (as Halasek points out in her interrogation of Bruffee); however, compared to the traditional composition classroom, it represents a changed positionality for students that calls on them to think about and perform writing in different ways. It also leads students to interrogate the choices they make when writing in more significant ways since the group has to negotiate these choices.

Kathleen Blake Yancey in the preface to *Delivering College Composition* brings up a more radical way in which collaboration may be refigured within today's classrooms. She looks to the work of Johndan Johnson-Eilola who "remediates the process-based, single-author notion of writing into multiple authorship and communal texts" (7). Through writing in online spaces, Johnson-Eilola potentially sees

WRITING AS THE RECURSIVE, SHARED (AND SOMETIMES ABSCONDED WITH) COORDINATION OR BUILDING OF SPACES AND FIELDS. In other words, writers are not individuals (or even groups) who produce texts, but participants within spaces who are recursively, continually, restructuring those (and other spaces).
(qtd. in Yancey 7)

Indeed, many of our students already have this sense of communal "writing" within shared blogs, webspaces, or even games. To enact this kind of collaboration within our composition classrooms would indeed invent a New Composition.

Heuristic #5: Civic Rhetoric

The fifth space for reinventing composition involves making civic concerns central to the writing in a composition course. The inclusion of civic matters into composition represents both a return to the roots of classical rhetoric and a return to Fred Newton Scott's application of classical civic rhetoric in the early twentieth century as a rhetoric for American democracy. James Berlin describes Scott's project and even quotes him:

Against the extreme individualism and class bias of current-traditional rhetoric and the rhetoric of liberal culture, Scott posed a rhetoric of public service, a system

distinguished by its ethical commitment to the public good: "Good discourse is that which by disseminating truth creates a healthy public opinion and thus effects, in Plato's words, 'a training and improvement in the souls of the citizens.'" (49).

The health of our society depends upon language and how language is used in our civic and social discourse. This significance of rhetoric can be seen in Fish's summary of Protagoras' views (as represented in Plato's *Theaetetus*):

the skill which produces belief and therefore establishes what, in a particular time and particular place, is true, is the skill essential to the building and maintaining of a civilized society. In the absence of a revealed truth, rhetoric is that skill, and in teaching it the sophists were teaching "the one thing that mattered, how to take care of one's own affairs and the business of the state." (1614)

We should include in our classrooms writing about social and civil discourse, even calling on students to compose writing that acts within this civic rhetorical forum, because it is the one thing that really matters.

Underlying this call for civic rhetoric resides the importance of ethics. A key component of including civic rhetoric should be the study of the way language works for communal good and bad—the ethical dimensions of all discourse. A civic rhetoric in composition would seek to foster the understanding in our students that "the quality of our lives, especially the ethical and communal quality, depends to an astonishing degree on the quality of our rhetoric" (Booth, *Rhetoric* xii). We should not shirk from the mission of making this awareness a major part of our composition classroom.

Conclusion

Ultimately, to ask the question of how we might rethink composition is to ask how we are to rethink what we teach our students. If we are to teach our students "how words works" in the 21st century, I believe we must evolve our practice beyond a composition still trapped in the 19th century. That means we must bring the language of the 21st century into our classroom—a language totally inflected by media (text, sounds, images)—and teach them a level of discernment within the rhetorical context of today. Donald Bartholomae imagines a composition that teaches a deeper form of criticism than our current practice: "we can imagine that the goal of writing instruction might be to teach an act of criticism that would enable a writer to interrogate his or her own text in relationship to the problems of writing and the problems of disciplinary knowledge. ... as something to be learned in practice, perhaps learned at the point of practice" (17). Put in Bakhtinian terms, that means we help student see "the dialogic principles at work in language use and knowledge construction ... [and help the student become] an agent in her own ideological becoming" (Halasek 192, 193).

Whether we call it criticism, ideological becoming, or practical wisdom (*phronesis*), I keep coming back to I.A. Richards' simple goal for a revived rhetoric—to teach how words work. This simple admonition represents the call for including rhetoric within composition, and this heuristic serves as a means for achieving this goal. It invites teachers and students into new rhetorical spaces from which they each can invent a New Composition for a new age.

Notes Page

1. Here is a copy of my handout for the "critical essay" that represents my own adherence to current-traditional epistemologies (found online at <http://www.accd.edu/sac/english/lirvin/wguides/critical.htm>):

Characteristics of a Critical Essay

"Critical" here is not used in the sense of "to criticize"--to find the faults in. Instead, "critical" is used in the same way "Critical Thinking" is used. A synonym might be "interpretive" or "analytical."

- 1) It is an [argument, persuasion essay](#) that in its broadest sense MAKES A POINT and SUPPORTS IT.
- 2) The "point" or "thesis" of a critical essay is interpretive in nature. That means the point is debatable and open to interpretation, not a statement of the obvious. The thesis statement is a clear, declarative sentence that comes at the end of the introduction.
- 3) Since the author of a critical essay can typically assume an informed audience, plot summary is not necessary and inappropriate.
- 4) Organization: Like any essay, the critical essay should have a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. As the author supports his or her point in the body of the essay, the author should "divide up the proof," which means to put only one primary support per paragraph. (for more see [Organization](#))
- 5) Support:
 - a) The primary source for support in the critical essay is from the text (or sources). The text is the authority, so [using quotations](#) is required.
 - b) The continuous movement of logic in a critical essay is "assert then support; assert then support." No assertion (general statement that needs proving) should be left unsupported (with specifics, often from the text(s)).
 - c) In general, for each assertion you need at least three supports. (see [Development](#))
- 6) A critical essay will always "document" its sources and clarify where outside information came from (following the rules of MLA Documentation Style).
- 7) Whenever the author moves from one main point (Primary Support) to the next, the author needs to clearly signal to the reader that this movement is happening. The topic/transition sentence must link back to the thesis as it states the topic of that paragraph. (see [Coherence](#))
[Sample Critical Essay](#)

2. The possibilities for rhetorical forums on the internet are endless, but teachers need to consider what is both appropriate for an academic context and workable for them. A rhetorical forum could be as small as a single class writing community, but it could be accomplished with blogs or through Facebook. A MOO or multi-player online world like Second Life could also establish a rhetorical forum that could take interesting shapes. Even a list-serv works as a rhetorical forum. I have recently become interested in [ELGGs](#) which are similar to social networking programs like MySpace or Facebook, but can be limited to a particular constituency of users. It contains a nice blend between blogs and social networking programs. Even online games, such as [INK](#), could represent new exciting rhetorical forums for students. These online spaces would also open up real possibilities for the use of other New Composition heuristics.

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