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Samantha Andrus-Henry
Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI

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Deepening Literature: Incorporating Rhetoric, Composition, and Discourse Analysis into High School English

Samantha Andrus-Henry
Grand Valley State University
Allendale, MI

Today's English students need to cycle through a range of genres from technical writing to fiction writing—not just literary genres. In addition, they need to cycle through different mediums and technological modalities, e.g., creating Web pages, filmmaking, and designing other visual and verbal text combinations. Furthermore, the standards of what is considered “good writing” have changed, as has the sophistication of the writer's audience. It is simply just not good enough anymore that Johnny can “kind of” read and write. Johnny, Jamalia, Jai, and Josephina must be able to not only read and write, but also to demonstrate a critically conscious understanding of reading and writing in personal, professional, social, cultural, and political contexts. Whew! Overwhelming, as if with the state standards there isn't enough to do already!

I suggest that high school English classes and curriculum need to include rhetoric, composition, and discourse analysis—in addition to literary practices. For a quick look at how all of this works together, please see the chart labeled Appendix – Table 1. This chart (read left to right) is a curriculum scaffold, which suggests connections among rhetoric, composition, new media, technical writing, discourse analysis, and literature. The information, which invites teacher agency, is based on state standards from Arizona, Michigan, Utah and Oregon. The chart is a synthesis of possible connections among state standards, rhetoric, discourse analysis, education, and

composition studies. A curriculum and course like this that integrates so many Language Arts perspectives could be very challenging—an integrated approach is not about where can we add more, but how we can *do more with less*. This is another opportunity to look at currently offered courses to discover places where integration might lessen our work, meeting the future needs of our students, and broadening their perspectives of English.

Overview of the Proposed Freshmen English Course

My argument for inclusion of rhetoric, composition, and discourse analysis in the high school curriculum is based on ideas I implemented as a high school English teacher, a state standards reading/writing specialist, and member of a curriculum development/assessment committee. The proposed curriculum starts with the freshman English course, an introductory course focused on the first two levels of Bloom's taxonomy (cf. Huit), knowledge and comprehension (and an introduction to the other levels). The sophomore and junior courses would work on deepening understanding of knowledge and comprehension of the taxonomy while actively learning the next levels, application, analysis, and synthesis, through reading and writing artifacts and demonstrating these aspects of the taxonomy. The senior level course objectives would focus on synthesis and evaluation.

This ambitious social constructivist-oriented course would invite students to work collaboratively and to engage in dialogue with all participants, starting with rhetoric and argument, threaded with discourse theory, and followed by more traditional curricula, e.g., literary analysis, grammar, poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction writing. The course would include tenets of expressivism, such as beginning with the self, relying on Socratic questioning, and occasionally working without an audience (cf. Elbow; Tobin; Newkirk; Root). The course would also fit a liberatory pedagogy approach as students would practice critical and self-reflexive¹ thought, learn to “take charge” of their education, and apply

their work actively in a democratic society (Gee; George; Giroux; Lu).

A Rationale for the Course

Why change the curriculum and incorporate rhetoric, composition, and discourse analysis, especially with increased pressure from state standards, crowded classrooms, less instructional time, and, of course, the very present competition to get our students' attention?

1. First, incorporating rhetoric, composition, and discourse analysis would help students meet state standards in more condensed chunks—that is, teachers could cover more state standards with a pedagogy that recognizes heuristics from each of these disciplines.
2. The curriculum would become integrated and scaffolded, and course materials would offer opportunities for students to make connections among the disciplines.
3. Best of all, instructors would not be teaching to the test; rather, they would be providing students with reading strategies and skills that would apply directly to their personal and non-academic lives. Students could work more independently and in small groups, freeing teachers to provide more help to struggling students; and students who excel could continue deepening their skills and knowledge.

What follows is a brief overview of each curricular component, including example indicators of how these might be implemented. However, the examples are only suggestions of how teachers might conceive and apply these ideas; the overarching goal of this proposal is to

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Rhetoric

The rhetorical elements of this course would include an introduction to the rhetorical triangle plus context, arrangement², rhetorical appeals, rhetorical devices, and the Toulmin model of argument³. Students would discuss the rhetorical triangle (who is the author, the audience, in what context, and for what purposes) and connect it to rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos by considering the author's credibility (ethos), use of pathos (emotion), and logos (logic) to reach the desired audience. The use of a simplified argument of Toulmin's model⁴ of claim, warrant, support, and refutation would prepare students to look at the overall effectiveness of the text from the rhetorical triangle to the chosen appeals, devices, logic, and to the underlying values (warrants and support) of the author, audience, and the text.

One method to help students identify these conceptual terms would be to list definitions on note cards to prepare for a daily bell ringer activity. One question might be: "hold the device that does X or is defined as Y, or which card is an example of Z." The goal, in addition to using these words during class discussion and adapting strategies in their own reading and writing, is to identify the names, definitions, and participate in discussions. Furthermore, students would be expected to identify, analyze, imitate, practice, and begin using the strategies. For example, students might imitate an author's use of rhetoric from the way he or she addresses and captures an audience's attention, and the specific rhetorical devices used in the text.

Students would also be asked to consider the visual and technical aspects of a work, e.g., the contrast, repetition, alignment, font, white space, format, medium, and modality. One useful heuristic includes a list of questions about visual elements, e.g.,

- What do you "see?"
- Is there a lot of white space? Why? What does that do?
- What strikes you as a choice, a choice the author might have made, or one a publisher or editor might have made?
- Why this modality or medium?
- What would a different modality or medium look like?
- What might be the restraints? What might affect choice?

Individual and group assignments could include analyzing, writing, and designing visual and written arguments, such as television and magazine advertisements, editorials, speeches, posters, song lyrics, political cartoons, graphs, charts, and photographs. Suggested student reading would mirror the type(s) of writing expected, and teachers would pull readings for each desired skill from over-arching categories, e.g., pop culture, professional, personal, and the canon or academic discourse (see Appendix – Table 2).

In past courses, I have had students participate in scavenger hunts, searching for examples of certain types of texts, genres, registers/tenors, voices, context, appeals, devices, and refutations around home, school, television, and personal conversation. Teachers could also use artifacts like children's picture books or advertising flyers, credit-card offers, Web sites, blogs and ask students similar questions that address rhetorical elements in order to prepare them to write.

Composition

This course would recognize that the students, the teacher, and the text bring unique contributions, empowering the classroom community to learn through choice and responsibility, risk and creativity, and support and feedback (cf. Wenger; A. George; Freire; Shore; Elbow; Rosenblatt). Students would read as well as write essays, fiction, creative non-fiction, argument, magazines advertisements, television commercials, plays, poetry, movies, instructions, journals, personal and private letters, junk mail, handbooks, textbooks, the practice and released state standards reading and writing test.

During the writing and revising processes, the writing pedagogy would direct students to consider how their writing might be used by, or is useful to, a reader or audience, and how to consider the visual and technical aspects of the work, e.g., white space, format, medium, and modality. Depending on the genre or writing prompt, this course would also incorporate peer review, writers' workshop, and technical writing strategies like focus groups and usability testing. Ideally, students would incorporate not only a wide array of these composing strategies, but also write in different genres, such as narrative, creative nonfiction, dialog, epigraphs, and poetry

into their final products. Students would draft texts after prompt, invention, and writing process discussions. After discussion, students would have several revision cycles: (1) ideas/content, structure, and arrangement; (2) clarity, word choice, sentence fluency, and cohesion; (3) grammar, editing and document design.

Document design is becoming more vital as writing mediums and messages change in this visual age (Kramer). At this stage and before, students would consider how best to express the information they wish to convey, what medium and/or modality would be best to achieve their desired effects, e.g., charts and diagrams, PowerPoint or Web page presentations, and with what different fonts, margins, colors, and white spaces.

Though these composing and revising strategies might be viewed as a series of steps, the revisions do not necessarily happen as steps since these revisions would be part of a peer review process and class discussion. For example, after the peer review cycle, next would come usability testing, where the piece is tried out to see if it works by an intended audience member outside the classroom (cf. Markel; Day; Lay; Hickson). And finally class publication would occur when the product is considered final and the class reads and comments on the papers, analyzing the writing styles and techniques they could "steal" for their next writing assignments (Bratcher; Gray-Rosendale). Analyzing the styles would also include seeing how the particular discourse works for the designed purposes of the writer.

Discourse Analysis

Ways of looking at how discourse(s) shapes reality would be applied to this course as part of theory and practice in research writing and evidence evaluation. Specific discourse analysis questions would address a range of discourses and genres, for example, expository, technical, research, literary, poetry, philosophical texts, pop culture texts, etc. Freire and Macedo argue reading the word and the world "[is] the extent that he or she is able to use language for social and political construction (159)," and to recognize it. Teachers could help students find where a miscommunication or tension point occurs in a particular text (Fairclough).

Students would also be introduced to research

methodologies to collect data to deepen their work beyond bibliographic citations, and to interpret oral and written texts, e.g., class discussion, conversations, dialog, monologue, speeches, and policy documents. Teachers could draw on a range of discourse analysis methodologies, e.g., Bahktin's intertextuality, Gee's four analytic tools (social languages, situated meanings, cultural models, and Discourse/discourse), Wenger's communities of practice, and Fairclough's cruce tension points⁵. Finally, this course could also include ways of viewing how discourse(s) shapes reality through examples from the works of Sassuare (sign/signifier), Halliday (systemic functional grammar⁶), Foucault (ideas on power), and Bourdieu (notions of habitus⁷). Although this list may appear overwhelming, the key is for teachers to continue developing possibilities and introducing them to students.

Teaching Multi-Theoretical High School English

English teachers already do much of what I have proposed, so how could other aspects be added to an already packed curriculum? Perhaps teachers could expand or deepen the level of vocabulary used with students; or use artifacts that are multi-layered; or by making visible the often-invisible artifacts (like junk mail); or have students address canonical works as different genre. For example, *Moby Dick* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* could also be read as technical writing, or students could read technical writing like instruction sets as narrative or poetic. These proposed changes to curriculum may also mean that English teacher education courses need to change to reflect more integrated approaches and offer wider theoretical bases.

Teaching English through a multi-theoretical, multi-hueristic approach can help us address more fully the ways "English" shapes our identities, experiences, and expectations. To teach English this proposed way is to recognize that words and communication practices shape personal, social, cultural, and political identities. Through this multilayered curriculum we acknowledge the social and academic needs of our students by guiding them to develop reading and writing strategies that they can incorporate in a range of contexts. Furthermore, students will learn how to arrive at conclusions about how different registers or discourses can suit their interests, needs and objectives; and

the awareness of these differences can prepare students for a future that they (and we) cannot yet see.

Endnotes

1. I mean reflexive as in Paulo Freire's notion that students should be taught to read the Word/World and locate oppression and themselves within that word/world.
2. On the curriculum chart, arrangement is called writing/reading structures—but these have also been called rhetorical modes.
3. Resources for this would include Edward P.J. Corbett, Kenneth Burke, Lloyd Bitzer, Roman Jakobson, and Stephen Toulmin.
4. This is a simplified argument model based on Stephen Toulmin's work.
5. This is looking for places in the data or a text (a tension point) that do not seem to add up or make sense: culturally, politically, socially, grammar-wise, numerically, this list could go on and on, but it's a good place to ask students to think about why they think it doesn't add up or make sense, and to get students to look both ways: could it or does it make sense in a different context, with a different audience, in a different culture?
6. Teaching grammar this way has the benefit of teaching grammar in terms of its function in the world—textually, interpersonally, and ideologically (Stockwell) besides teaching it rhetorically (Kollin).
7. The teacher would focus the discussion on the physical aspects that habitus shapes.

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General To Specific Text Concerns					Reading Writing Genre	6	Rhetoric & Discourse Analysis	Learning Cycle					Composition Writing Process		
						Writing Traits									Writing:
Social Language (register)	Pop Culture Reading & Writing Artifacts/Texts	Professional Reading & Writing Artifacts/Texts	Personal Reading & Writing Artifacts/Texts	Canon Reading & Writing Artifacts/Texts	Visual	Organization	Genre, Gee's Big C	Introduction- Discussion - Writer's Notebook	Identify - Discuss - Writer's Notebook - Lit Circle	Analysis - Discuss - Writer's Notebook - Lit Circle	Imitation - Discuss - Writer's Notebook - Lit Circle	Practice - Discuss - Writer's Workshop	Use - Discuss - Writer's Workshop	Gestation Prewriting Drafting Practice	Ideas/Content Organization Clarity Word Choice Sentence Fluency Cohesion Grammar Editing Document Design Usability Loop In Class Publication
Cultural Model					Expository	Conventions	Doc Design								
Mode of Expression					Expository	Ideas/Content	Rhetorical Triangle								
Genre Type (CDA tenor)					Technical	Voice	Discourse Communities								
Reason for Text (situated meaning)					Technical	Conventions	Literary Elements								
Whole Text					Research	Voice	Cultural models								
Text Structure(s)					Literary	Ideas/Content	Rhetorical Appeals								
Paragraph					Literary	Voice	Writing/Reading Structures, Social Language								
Sentence					Poetry	Organization	Toulmin & Evidence								
Word					Poetry	Conventions	Gee's D/d								
Punctuation					Philosophy	Organization	Logical Fallacies								
WhiteSpace					Philosophy	Ideas/Content									
					Theory	Ideas/Content									
					Theory	Voice									

Table 2

	Pop Culture Writing & Reading Artifacts	Professional Writing & Reading Artifacts	Personal Writing & Reading Artifacts	Cannon Writing & Reading Artifacts
Visual				
Expository				
Technical				
Research				
Literature				
Poetry				
Philosophy				
Theory				

About the Author

Samantha Andrus-Henry (andruss@gvsu.edu) is a visiting professor at Grand Valley State University and is writing a dissertation based on the work she did in helping a high school align and create curriculum for the state standards. She taught high school for six years, worked as a reading and writing state standards assessment specialist, and as an education consultant; and she is finishing her PhD through Michigan Technological University. Samantha thanks Elizabeth Flynn, Randy Freisinger, Vicki Bergvall, Tom Henry, Anne Wysocki, Cindy and Dickie Selfe for their support and insight on this project.