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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to the students in my first-year writing classes--both those represented in this essay and others--who have helped me learn about this concept over the past five years.

Readings for Rhetorical Responsibility: Using Contemporary Online Texts to Deepen A Concept

ADRIENNE JANKENS

Over the past several years, my research, teaching, and life work has convinced me of the necessity of emphasizing rhetorical responsibility in my first-year writing (FYW) courses. In FYW, students practice reading and analysis in preparation for crafting researched arguments (visual and essay-based). This practice helps them develop reading, writing, research, and reflection skills they can recontextualize for use in writing across their university courses and in other contexts. Instead of merely appropriating a definition of *rhetorical responsibility* from any one scholarly or disciplinary text (though, the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* provides a useful starting point for conversation), I have worked with students to understand the concept in practice. The most essential definition we have come to through these discussions is that *rhetorical responsibility* means *making speaking and writing decisions that demonstrate an awareness of the impact of those decisions on one's relationship with others*. This concept matters to me because I hope that my students will take from our classroom practice something that is daily relevant in their lives, something they can see working in their home, school, workplace, and community relationships. I hope they see the ways language choices can improve (or

Responsibility—the ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English and The National Writing Project, 2011, p. 1).

While preparing students to find meaningful work and earn a living is certainly a valid goal of education, I argue it is not enough. We must also prepare students as civic participants and community members, as writers and thinkers who are able to listen and engage tension and difference, and as agents in the local contexts that matter to them (Stenberg, 2015, p. 8).

challenge) these relationships.

It is also important to me that students are able to articulate their own definitions of what it means to be rhetorically responsible—after all, they are familiar with the experience of feeling listened to by friends or family, or, conversely, with experiences of being misunderstood or hurt by others' words. And their K-12 experiences engaging in digital literacy practices have helped them understand how they function as digital citizens, both responsibly using material they access online and being thoughtful about how they choose to present themselves in online spaces.

I have found over time that discussing contemporary essays and articles on culturally relevant topics with my students has been the most productive way to develop our working definition of *rhetorical responsibility*. Maybe this is because the texts are about topics that students are already

familiar with: free speech, social media, anti-racism. And maybe this is also because the texts bring together varying perspectives on these topics that allow us to consider how we can listen to others with whom we share dialogue.

This work with developing a classroom concept is akin to Shari J. Stenberg's (2015) work with developing "a rhetoric of emotion" (p. 67) or Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak's (2014) development of a transfer-focused FYW curriculum that emphasizes students' development of theories of writing and the disciplinary vocabulary to support these theories. As a class, we use disciplinary texts and contemporary public texts to develop and articulate an understanding of rhetorical responsibility. Our reading of these texts helps us to consider how the concept comes to bear on relationships, especially relationships with peers and others who read our written ideas.

Engaging My Teacher Research on Rhetorical Responsibility

Every year, in August and December, I spend hours reading through articles in *The Atlantic*, *Teen Vogue*, and other online magazines, selecting texts that feel relevant to both students' interests or experiences and our focus in FYW: developing rhetorical awareness through practice with analysis, argument, and research. I have to think about how even discussion of these texts will shape a relationship between me and my students: how this rhetorical analysis and feedback work will show each of us what we value and will help us learn how to communicate better with each other. The articles and essays I ultimately land on are those that can help us develop complex notions of rhetorical responsibility in action. Some of the texts we analyze and write about are time-tested—I have used them for several years; some of them speak more to the moment of a particular semester.

Together, students and I put these texts in conversation with textbook concepts, this past year using Drew M. Loewe and Cheryl Ball's *Bad Ideas About Writing* (2017) as part of an open-access texts initiative in our general education Composition program. Much of this analysis and synthesis of ideas happens in the first six weeks of the course, while we explore core rhetorical vocabulary and work through composing the first project of the course, a rhetorical analysis essay, which includes a reflective section where students are asked to explain how the text they have analyzed has helped them develop a working definition of *rhetorical responsibility*.

Below, I cite examples of students' reflections on the concept, which I draw from a 2019–2020 IRB-approved teacher research study, using pseudonyms for participating students. This study, which

I conducted across two semesters—in one online section of my FYW course (Fall 2019) and one face-to-face section (Winter 2020)—included ten student participants in total, who were consented through a third-party recruiter. Overall, though I did not collect demographic data, I can report anecdotally that these student participants represented the diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and experiential backgrounds of students at my urban research university. The sample is heavily female (8 of 10 participants), and the examples below come from the writing of four of these female students. In my role as teacher researcher, I took notes on several classroom conversations, recorded student presentations, and collected all student writing (i.e. reflections, drafts, formal projects, and presentation slides) for analysis. Ultimately, I wanted to understand how students wrote about rhetorical responsibility in their reflections. The examples I discuss below all come from either students' rhetorical analysis essays or their final reflective essays of the semester. I selected these examples for my purposes in this essay because each one presents specific commentary on one of the online texts I discuss.

Reading and Writing about Rhetorical Responsibility

For several semesters, instructors in my program used Aaron Hanlon's "College Students Aren't 'Cuddly Bunnies'" across sections of FYW as we piloted the integration of a required first-week assessment of students' reading, summary, and annotations skills. When I first encountered the essay a few years ago, I found it valuable for helping my students practice careful reading; the structure of the piece requires students to read through to the

end to understand the argument. But I also found that beyond this initial week's work, students and I returned to the text frequently to understand Hanlon's point, exemplified in other texts we read and in students' own writing: emotion and reason both have a place in the development of argumentation and in the communication of experience.

In the essay, which was published in *The New Republic* in January 2016, Hanlon responds to an article published in the college newspaper of Mount St. Mary's University, which reported the rhetorical sloppiness of a college president calling for revoking the admissions of several first-year students to improve retention optics. Hanlon's focus in the article is not a rebuking of the action itself, but of the rhetoric the college president uses: an invocation of the problematic commonplace binary of emotion versus reason and the labeling of college students as too reliant on reactionary emotion. His lesson to readers, which comes at the end of the piece, is to attend to moments that invoke this false binary of emotion versus reason and to remember that emotion has a basis in experience. Hanlon addresses this when he writes that we need to listen carefully when we hear someone's perspective being minimized because of the inclusion of feelings:

Are the grievances rooted in material conditions of oppression, like institutional racism or structural pay inequality? If they are—even if they're accompanied by expressions of feeling—you may be experiencing an attempt to shut down the discussion by portraying real problems as matters of "mere" feeling. (para. 8)

But, as a class, we also experienced this listening practice as we worked through the text to understand what couldn't

always be heard the first time through. Riley, a student in the F19 semester, reflected on this experience in her final essay, when she looked back at her first attempt at reading Hanlon's text:

I remember back on the first assignment, I was very confused on the main point of the argument. I wrote, "That college students are not and cannot be treated as cuddly bunnies. It is very true. We cannot just be spoon-fed information and asked to regurgitate the information back on the test. We are not robots nor should be treated like them." When in fact, the most important part of the article was within the last two paragraphs of the article. Reading is sometimes about looking for what isn't there or reading in between the lines.

In these lines, Riley demonstrated that using a variety of reading strategies is important for understanding arguments; context clues, like titles, provide some help, but to understand someone's argument, we may need to look, or listen, more closely. She continued,

After I had gotten some feedback from my professor, she told me to go back and re-read it again, so I did. And it was fascinating how I could see right away, where I mistakenly had the wrong idea in my head. I read the title and tried to relate the story to it, but I shouldn't have been looking for those ties.

In these sentences, Riley described how returning to Hanlon's helped her understand his argument more clearly. We can imagine how this prolonged listening/reading practice may be valuable in other communicative contexts: how, for example, students might re-read peer or teacher feedback to think about their readers' experiences working through an essay draft,



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or how they might give some time and re-reading to social media posts before responding. Using this text at the beginning of the class has helped me highlight to students that careful reading and listening is part of enacting rhetorical responsibility, and I use our discussions on the text to first explicitly introduce that term.

With this listening/reading practice underway, to begin our rhetorical analysis project, I typically present students with three or four text options and ask them to spend some time reading and making decisions about which text they would like to write about. From there, we do small group mapping exercises, working through applying rhetorical vocabulary (e.g. context, purpose, audience, exigence, claim, etc.) to each text; in these small group conversations, students practice listening to each other's initial analyses of the texts, conduct needed re-reading and internet research, and negotiate what to put down on paper. This initial mapping of rhetorical concepts, then, helps students transition into conducting their individual analyses and composing their essays. While the

common syllabus for the course requires a traditional, academic rhetorical analysis essay, students in my classes add a reflective conclusion in which they discuss how their analysis of the text has helped them further develop a working definition of *rhetorical responsibility*.

Lauren Michele Jackson's *Teen Vogue* op-ed "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs" (2017), one of these text options, highlights rhetorical decision-making and GIFs. Aside from the valuable work this op-ed does simply bringing to our attention that the use of images of black people as reaction GIFs is a kind of "digital blackface," there are several moments in Jackson's text that I find compelling for illustrating principles of responsible rhetoric more generally. Primarily, Jackson's attention to the ways that racism is enacted through the use of images can help students see their rhetorical decision-making in classroom work as having serious impact on peers and other viewers. As Jackson puts it, "Ultimately, black people and black images are thus relied upon to perform a huge amount of emotional labor online on behalf of nonblack users" (para. 12).

In subsequent multimodal projects in our class, students are invited to reflect on their selection of images and encouraged to create their own images rather than outsourcing emotional labor in the ways that Jackson describes. Very practically, because the op-ed is an online essay with hypertext, we are invited, as readers, to learn about the history of blackface and are reminded of the persistence of problematic and even dangerous representation in these online images through the inclusion of myriad examples of reaction GIFs. In the center of Jackson's op-ed she states a general principle for decision-making about internet sharing: "We all need to be cognizant of what we share, how we share, and to what extent that sharing dramatizes preexisting racial formulas inherited from 'real life.' The Internet isn't a fantasy—it's real life" (para. 6). In closing her analysis of Jackson's essay, Kiki, a student in my W20 class, wrote that Jackson brings to light the implications of using "whatever meme, gif, [or] sticker we want," and then hinted at her attention toward rhetorical responsibility (though she did not get explicit in the draft she shared with me): "The actions that we choose to make will always be analyzed by somebody else." For Kiki, Jackson's text brought the issue of image use to readers' attention "with evidence that will rock [their] previous thoughts [on] internet use." It was an eye-opening read that got her thinking about rhetorical decision-making at the start of our writing course.

The students at my urban research university represent a diversity of background that is hard to rival, and it is a value held by many teachers in our program to allow for students' diversity of experiences, cultures, and voices to bear on the writing work we do in our general education writing courses, especially FYW. In both the F19 and W20

semesters, about half of the students in my class selected N'Jameh Camara's "Names That Are Unfamiliar to you Aren't 'Hard,' They're Unpracticed" (2019) as their focus for the rhetorical analysis essay. Camara's topic—the experience of people not bothering to learn your name—was one that many of them commented they could relate to. And because the essay drew on the same principles of experience-as-evidence that we discussed when we looked at Hanlon's essay, many students found they had both an experiential and an analytical foot in the door with her text. Beyond that, though, students seemed drawn to Camara's straightforward expression of the pain of cultural dismissal via an ignored name and the need to learn someone's name to develop a working relationship with them. Students also dug into Camara's argument that we need to change the way we talk about unfamiliar names and that the dismissal of cultural names is an exercise of white supremacy. As Camara puts it,

This is more insidious and socially acceptable than white hoods and neo-Nazi graffiti, but communicates clearly that 'white names' are easier and more desirable than names which stretch our understanding of who we—as a cast, an office, a neighborhood, a nation—are. (para. 6)

Autumn, a student in the W20 class, closed her rhetorical analysis essay with a summary of Camara's use of pathos:

Camara supports her claims with her use of pathos to make readers carry these reminders with them, Learn how to say the names of those around you. She wraps this all up with what felt like a hand holding circle through text, she wants readers to understand she didn't just yell at them in a subtle way, she wants them to see it to unite us and

open up the world more.

Here, Autumn implicitly drew on our class discussion of the Hanlon text, seeing how Camara is effectively using her experience and feelings to directly tell readers, including students who share space in a writing classroom, how to meet and treat each other better.

A fourth illustrative text, which we used in W20, was Megan Garber's "Sorry, Not Sorry," published on *The Atlantic* website in December 2019. In the essay, Garber responds to the phenomenon of the non-apologies of famous men in entertainment and politics, who, defying the need to sincerely apologize for past actions, instead use "remorselessness as an act of resistance" (para. 21). Garber includes several quotes from these celebrities and politicians that demonstrate the striking difference in rhetorical dispositions between those who use apologies as a means of connecting with the public and those who work to demonstrate their power to that public by claiming "impunity" (para. 4). While an apology is supposed to support reconciliation between parties, Garber points out the ways that these public figures sometimes make the decision to not apologize, or to frame an apology in a way that does not claim responsibility. Sara, a student in my W20 class, seized on the value of Garber's text in light of our class discussion: "Ultimately, Garber considers apologies to be synonymous with a willingness to understand and learn from failed interactions with individuals whose rights have not always been respected and/or those who have been systemically [sic] oppressed." Sara's reflection on Garber's text helped her identify three tenets of rhetorical responsibility:

Based on Garber's article, one could conclude that responsible rhetoric involves speaking and writing that is effective, respectful, and truthful. It

would specifically involve awareness and respect for the thoughts and experiences of others. Additionally, it would require willingness to admit mistakes and change future actions to allow for the growth of relationships with others.

Sara's analysis, then, brought to the table of our classroom conversation ways for us to talk about responsible rhetorical decision-making in our subsequent writing projects. Her third point, that part of responsible rhetoric is responsive rhetorical adaptation for the health of the relationship, especially hits on what I hope students will consider in their research and writing work in my course. In her final reflection for the class, Sara wrote about this in terms of learning how to write for a "targeted audience" (one interested in theatre) and using references to the popular musical, *Hamilton*, in her researched argument essay about the Broadway production of *Beetlejuice: The Musical*: "I continue to use targeted references to establish ethos with my audience...Prior to this class I had very little experience writing to a targeted audience beyond that of marketing products, so I had to learn how to write convincingly in a new way." Sara also wrote in this final reflection about spending time "trying to give thoughtful contributions to [her] peers in [their] reviews." Across the semester, Sara's formal projects and reflections showed her to be attuned to her relationship with her reading audience.

These students' reflections add to our classroom conversation a cumulative definition of rhetorical responsibility: writers are rhetorically responsible when they demonstrate careful reading of or listening to others' texts and ideas, when they recognize that their selection of images and sources has an impact on their audience, when they

recognize the identities of those they write for and about, and when they respect and work to understand others' experiences. In classroom lessons (in online videos in the fall semester; in chalkboard lists in the winter semester), I reiterated these definitions to students as we anticipated creating presentations and crafting visual and essay-based arguments. In occasional one-on-one conferences, we brought these concepts to bear on discussions about integrating information from sources and planning project design. Students practiced employing responsible rhetorical choices when they formally presented their work to their classmates or gave each other feedback on drafts.

From Habits and Dispositions to Action

There are writing teachers and scholars who are wary of the idea that we can teach students to develop particular habits of mind, arguing that perhaps either students embody these particular dispositions (like creativity or persistence or responsibility), or they don't. In her introduction to a study of students' discussion of dispositions, E. Shelley Reid (2017) expresses a long-held incredulity that these are "situational, strategic, and relevant rather than innate and ineffable" (p. 291). Others, like Kristine Hansen (2012), point out that even if our composition classrooms support students' practice with habits of mind like openness or engagement, this might have little to no effect on their development of writing skills (p. 541). And others, like Carol Severino (2012), suggest that emphasis of these habits of mind might prove exclusionary to some students (p. 534). In my early work with this concept, hoping to use scaffolded learning activities to support students in being more receptive to learning about writing with their peers,

I found that students who came into the class "teacher-oriented" (disposed to working on their writing only in response to teacher feedback) or "self-oriented" (making writing decisions only based in prior knowledge) in their learning persisted in that disposition throughout the course. However, students who were "other-oriented"—that is, students who primarily worked to learn through collaboration and dialogue with others—also persisted in displaying that disposition (Jankens, 2014). While not described in the brief analyses above, students in my F19 and W20 classes similarly displayed this range of dispositions, evident in their reflections on peer review and teacher feedback.

Scholars studying dispositions in writing classrooms find that repeated practice with reflection on the habits of mind *at least* helps students identify and use the language of the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* in their descriptions of learning and writing (Khost, 2017) or strengthen the ties between their dispositions and their writing work (Reid, 2017). For example, in my W20 course, across the semester, Sara wrote extensively about her *engagement* in her writing projects. Engagement is, perhaps, a familiar or accessible concept for students: when do they *like* doing the work they are assigned? Why? Other concepts might be a little harder for students to express in reflective writing, but explicit practice talking and writing about those concepts may make them more clear, more accessible for students, and it seems that reflection on concepts like *rhetorical responsibility* might bring *responsible* practices, like those described in the *Framework*, into focus for students. That is to say, making rhetorical responsibility concrete—through students' work analyzing texts, crafting working

definitions, employing it in their essay-based and multimodal composing, and reflecting on it through both classroom conversation and writing—may be a way to tie the disposition of responsibility to the practice of rhetoric. This persistent work in the concept, then, might help students develop theories of writing (Yancey et al., 2014) that consider rhetorical responsibility as a concept that means something across writing personal, academic, professional and community-writing contexts.

Conclusion

Beginning this reflective conceptual work through discussion of course readings has helped students in my class see how rhetorical responsibility might be put into action, as it is either demonstrated by these authors, or argued for in their texts. Later in the semester, they are invited to reflect on employing rhetorical responsibility as they craft their researched argument essays and prepare visual displays of their writing work for a campus audience. This early work with these texts is my way of laying the groundwork for rhetorical decision-making students will make throughout the course.

Describing the interplay between course texts and student engagement in alternative modes of knowledge-making, Stenberg (2015) writes, “... students can’t be forced to engage in a different kind of knowledge making; however, if an invitation is issued, and if that invitation is reinforced by textual models in the course readings, then, as she suggests, the space is there should students wish to occupy it” (p. 66). Now, Stenberg writes here not only about the matter of selecting the right texts to do the needed work; she also writes about supporting students in enacting a kind of knowledge-making outside

the traditional. In Stenberg’s case, she writes about the function of low stakes writing spaces for supporting students’ engagement with specific course inquiries. In my case, I hope students experience their role in developing and applying a rhetorical concept, rather than merely plugging in moments of “logos, pathos, and ethos” in their essays to check some perceived boxes. I see the texts described above working meaningfully to help construct ways of thinking and writing about rhetorical responsibility; because the texts are publicly circulated, and reflect on contemporary social issues, they work on a few levels, demonstrating theory in practice and serving to connect students to discussion of rhetoric (and rhetors’ responsibilities) through topics they may relate to and care about. This work reflecting on rhetorical responsibility falls, perhaps, into what Cassandra Woody (2020), writing about feminist rhetorical practices in FYW, might call “dangerous” practice, “moves that demand critical reflection and thoughtful consideration of both self and Other before engaging in persuasion” (502). That’s a good kind of dangerous.

Because these texts address rhetorical and social issues pertinent to students’ lives, they also provide ways for students to think about how they employ rhetorical decision-making in contexts outside of writing academic essays, often exploring moral and ethical obligations of communicating with real others. I see this reflected in Aaron Hanlon’s August 8, 2019 Twitter thread when he writes,

I’ve forgotten that a *NYT* or *New Republic* audience is not ‘the public’. I’m [sic] smuggled academic language and cadence into my public writing to match the + [new tweet] + tone and voice of the writers I’m typically arguing

against—professional columnists, pundits, lawyers, other academics, etc. And while that kind of writing needs to be done, it’s not enough.

Hanlon makes the point that there is important rhetorical decision-making in recognizing how best to approach one’s audience for the sake of that audience (and not for the speaker’s/writer’s own ends). This example pulled from social media, of a writer reflecting on his own rhetorical choices and how these choices impact readers, livens discussion of responsible rhetoric. Appearing on an ever-lengthening Twitter feed, it has an impact on readers in a particular moment; if someone chooses to retweet it, it has a moment again. Our writing is taken up by real readers. My students cultivate relationships with their peer readers through their classroom writing. I work on one with you, now.

Our work with contemporary online texts has helped both springboard students’ work with reflection on rhetorical decision-making and responsibility as well as our development of the language we can use to describe the concept. The time spent reading and reflecting on the choices I make for the texts that will begin our work together is so worth it. I will ask them to spend time sitting with a text for their rhetorical analysis projects—I will ask them to practice careful listening to perspectives across their research work in the class. I will have them spend time reading and responding to each other in order to keep doing that work together better. And I hope this is all work that sticks.

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