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ABSTRACT

During the late nineteenth century, the rhetorical modes of description, narration, exposition, and argumentation developed as democratizing tools to help writing instructors acclimate inexperienced students to the conventions of academic writing. These modes continue to inform many textbooks and guide many composition instructors particularly when dealing with inexperienced academic writers. However, the teaching of rhetorical modes may actually hinder students' grasp of academic writing. Drawing from my personal experience as a composition instructor and English tutor at Cape Fear Community College, I will point out several common problems that occur when the rhetorical modes are treated as prescribed essay formats with no rhetorical purpose.

The problems caused by the modes are rooted in current-traditionalism, the pedagogical philosophy from which they were developed. Current-traditionalism is a pedagogical philosophy that approaches teaching as an objective, standardized transfer of knowledge from teachers to students. This pedagogical philosophy continues to influence writing instruction, particularly in composition classes geared toward inexperienced academic writers such as those found in community colleges. However, the pedagogical philosophy of critical literacy has developed to address the shortcomings of current-traditionalism. A critical literacy approach to rhetorical modes shifts the focus from isolating and prescribing rhetorical strategies in the form of modal essays to engaging in organic combinations and considerations of modal strategies and the way they are used to achieve rhetorical purposes. In this thesis, I argue that such an approach avoids the pedagogical and political pitfalls often associated with the current-traditionalism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank all of my friends and family for supporting me through the writing of this thesis. Special thanks go to Stephen Dugan and Robert Rogan who, through several late-night discussions, provided me with insightful and invaluable feedback. I am also grateful to my wonderful thesis committee. Dr. Ervin, Dr. Huntley, and Dr. Wentworth are not only excellent committee members; they are excellent educators and I am truly inspired by their examples. I have learned so much from each member of my committee during my time here at UNCW. I am especially appreciative of Dr. Ervin, the chair of my committee, who has encouraged me, through her patience, guidance, and commitment to excellence, to succeed. Finally, I would like to thank all of my students, who have taught me so much about teaching.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Kathryn Brock.