

CHAPTER TWO: PEDAGOGICAL PHILOSOPHIES

Although the history of American composition instruction has been well documented, most instructors remain unaware of the major pedagogical movements that shape how writing is taught today. This lack of historical grounding is understandable; with busy schedules and heavy course loads, most instructors don't have time to research the history of the pedagogical theories which inform their own teaching practices, and textbooks typically provide little, if any, historical background. However, this lack of awareness of our profession's past developments and contributions remains unfortunate because without reflection, many practices, such as the prescription of rhetorical modes, take on an ahistorical presence in contemporary writing instruction. Many composition instructors are familiar with rhetorical modes, but few know that the rhetorical modes were not always prominent and did not develop until the late nineteenth century. Therefore, a brief historical survey of American composition pedagogies is in order to understand contemporary composition instruction.

In this chapter, I will discuss the major pedagogical shifts in American composition instruction from belletrism (the literary approach inherited from British aristocracy) to current-traditionalism (the efficient, skills-based approach developed during the nineteenth century) to critical literacy (a problem-posing approach that questions the assumptions of the previous pedagogical philosophies). Each of these movements reflects larger social values and goals, and each still influences the way we teach writing today. It is important to note that while those who adhered to these pedagogical philosophies each responded to the problems and shortcomings of the

pedagogies that preceded them, these philosophies are not clear opposites and to view them as such is to oversimplify the complexities of American composition instruction.

American composition began as a belletristic rhetoric. According to James Berlin, before the rhetorical modes and before current-traditionalism, American higher education consisted of small elite institutions that served the aristocratic purpose of preparing privileged, upper class, young men for “the three major professions: law, medicine, and the church” (21). These colleges were influenced by their British predecessors, and their general aim, until the mid-1800s, was to preserve the intellectual culture. Writing instruction during this time reflected this general purpose of cultural preservation, and composition instructors taught in the belletristic fashion, which categorized writing not by modes but by recognized classical genres. As Robert Connors puts it, the instructor’s job “was to produce and disseminate raw information in certain standard forms—the treatise, the lecture series, the rhetorical lesson” and other such writing forms (Composition-Rhetoric 72). Belletristic instruction primarily focused on the stylistic qualities of these established genres and helped to pass on upper-class notions of beauty and culture to promising young aristocrats.

By the mid-1800s, the emergence of the American middle class and the resulting increase in student population forced major changes in education. College growth had increased so dramatically that “college-founding . . . was undertaken in the same spirit as canal-building, cotton-ginning, farming, and goldmining” (Rudolph 48). After the Civil War, the Land-Grant Colleges Act (also known as the Morrill Act) provided states with grants to establish agricultural and mechanical colleges, thus opening the doors of higher education to a larger and more diverse student population (Connors, Composition-

Rhetoric 79). New professions developed, and the small, elite colleges that once specialized in the preparation of lawyers, doctors, and clergy began opening their admissions to the growing number of students who sought certifications in these new fields (Berlin 21).

With the doors opening to the middle class, the role of college shifted from cultural preservation to academic acclimation. While the teacher of belletristic rhetoric had enjoyed the comfort of refining already well-prepared students, the instructor during this new college boom was faced with teaching students who were inexperienced with academic writing. Classical studies gave way to a new type of writing instruction “designed to provide the new middle-class professionals with the tools to avoid embarrassing themselves in print” (Berlin 35). Composition instructors, many of whom were also new and inexperienced, abandoned the belletristic approach for a more efficient pedagogy that could effectively teach students of varying degrees of writing competency and differing backgrounds. The term current-traditionalism has been used by many composition theorists to refer to the pedagogical philosophy that developed after belletrism. Current-traditionalism is a scientific approach that focuses instruction on the easily teachable and gradable aspects of academic writing, such as grammar, punctuation, and organization.

Current-traditionalism was heavily influenced by both Scottish Common Sense Realism and faculty psychology, which held that “the mind is equipped with faculties that enable it to perceive the external object directly through the medium of sense impression” (Berlin 8). Both faculty psychologists and Scottish Realists believed that anyone with the proper tools could accurately perceive and document knowledge. Current-traditionalists

embraced this idea that knowledge existed outside of human experience which allowed them to approach writing as an isolated skill that could be taught as such. Since good writing was thought simply to exist, instructors, who were pressured by the growing number of inexperienced students, sought the proper formulas and conventions to produce good writing. During this time, the rhetorical modes emerged and redefined academic writing to meet the needs of instructors seeking writing assignments that could be readily prescribed and easily graded.

In “The Rise and Fall of the Rhetorical Modes,” Connors traces the rhetorical modes to Samuel Newman, who published the first categorization of the modes in A Practical System of Rhetoric, where he organized writing into “didactic, persuasive, argumentative, descriptive, and narrative” (445). However, modal categories did not take root until fifty years later, when Alexander Bain’s English Composition and Rhetoric (1866) further explained the modal categories:

Those that have for their object to inform the understanding, fall under three heads—Description, Narration, and Exposition. The means of influencing the will are given under one head, Persuasion. (qtd. in Connors, “The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse” 445)

Bain’s modes reflected the faculty psychology belief that the mind was compartmentalized, and each mode was thought to appeal to a different mental faculty. The nineteenth century categorization of modes reflected the overall shifting goal of education, which became the efficient preparation of inexperienced students’ minds for academic study. Many instructors today, particularly those who teach inexperienced

academic writers, still adhere to the belief that descriptive, narrative, expository, and argumentative essays can help develop students' thinking abilities.

The emergence of textbooks also contributed to the popularization of Bain's modal categories. Instructors of belletristic rhetoric depended mostly on lecture, but the increase in student population also meant an increase in new teachers—many of whom were untrained. According to Connors, the pool of qualified instructors stretched thin, and these new inexperienced teachers relied on textbooks for guidance, “making the centerpiece of the course the text rather than the teacher” (Composition-Rhetoric 74). Textbooks guided new teachers with a solid curriculum and structure for the course, and Bain's modal classifications became the preferred approach for both teachers and textbooks.

Bain's followers further refined the categories of writing assignments. For example, in 1891, Fred N. Scott and Joseph Denney published Paragraph Writing, which divided writing into Contrast, Explanation, Definition, Illustration, Detail, and Proofs. According to Connors, the modes continued to direct composition pedagogy throughout the early twentieth century, and later texts such as Maurice Garland Fulton's Expository Writing divided exposition into Definition, Classification and Division, Contrast, Comparison or Analogy, Examples, and Descriptive Exposition (“The Rise and Fall of Rhetorical Modes” 449).

Modal divisions and the philosophy of current-traditionalism are still prevalent in contemporary writing instruction. In A Teacher's Introduction to Composition in the Rhetorical Tradition, published in 1994 by the National Council of Teachers of English,

Ross Winterowd and Jack Blum outline eight common characteristics of current-tradition pedagogy which many of us will recognize in our classes today:

1. Style and form become pretty much the “all” of rhetoric.
2. Rubrics, such as the five-paragraph essay, make composition easier to teach.
3. Pedagogy becomes text-oriented, as opposed to process-oriented.
4. Instruction becomes bottom-up (from word to sentence to paragraph) rather than top-down (from purpose or intention to general plan to textual details).
5. Instruction becomes “methodical,” a series of statements or injunctions leading students systematically through the composing process.
6. The classification of modes (description, narration, exposition, and argumentation or persuasion) becomes almost universal.
7. Rhetoric as the art of public discourse is abandoned, with the consequent diminution of such “genres” as argumentation and the abandonment of such quotidian forms as the letter and the formal report.
8. Correcting themes becomes the teacher’s primary, if not exclusive, concern. (31)

These characteristics—the use of rubrics, the focus on form, the standardization of instruction, and the use of modes—exemplify the current-traditional values of efficiency, authority, science, and correctness that emerged during the college boom of the mid to late 1900s. The concerns that originally drove instructors to abandon the belletristic

approach for the pseudo-scientific efficiency of current-traditionalism still influence many of today's instructors, and textbooks continue to guide the composition curriculum. Contemporary writing instructors, faced with a similar struggle to teach composition to a large number and variety of students, have been drawn to the pragmatic efficiency of current-traditionalism.

However, current-traditionalism, while efficient in many regards, has not escaped criticism. In fact, critical literacy, a pedagogical movement inspired by Paulo Freire's 1970 critique of traditional education in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, has encouraged many composition instructors to question current-traditional assumptions and reexamine their own instructional goals and practices. Drawing from his experience teaching literacy to Brazilian peasants, Freire observed that education traditionally disempowers students through relentless prescription which "represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness" (47). Freire's critique of educational prescriptions caught the attention of many composition instructors, particularly when he characterized the traditional relationship between teachers and students as "banking."

Education thus becomes the act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor [...]. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (72)

Freire found this banking model problematic because it places students in a passive role of accepting the teachers' knowledge typically given in the form of lectures, worksheets,

or textbooks. Instead of actively creating knowledge, students are expected to memorize the knowledge given by teachers. According to Freire, students may or may not learn this banked material, but if they have succeeded in the banking model, they have learned the desired response to authority: unquestioning submission. Furthermore, the banking model treats students as empty vessels that need to be filled with knowledge, ignoring any prior knowledge that students might possess about the subject. By viewing students as blank slates or empty vessels, banking instructors often unfairly make assumptions regarding students' learning abilities.

Many writing instructors and theorists recognized the banking model in their own teaching and began questioning their instructional practices and assumptions, thus sparking the pedagogical movement known as critical literacy. In Collision Course, Russel Durst offers this explanation of critical literacy:

A critical approach to literacy thus emphasizes certain broad dispositions of mind, including reflectiveness about self, about one's wider society, and about one's role in that society. A critical literacy approach also stresses awareness and appreciation of group differences, multi-perspectival consideration of ideas, and questioning established ways of thinking. The postmodernist ideas that reality is socially constructed and truth rhetorically determined are fundamental assumptions of this pedagogy. In terms of actual writing and reading strategies, a critical literacy approach emphasizes rigorous development of ideas, the opportunity for feedback from a number of different sources, extensive invention and revision, and careful reading and re-reading of one's own

texts and those of others. This pedagogy therefore combines complex and demanding aspects of academic, civic, and personal literacy with the aim, not just of improving students' abilities to communicate in writing, but of encouraging in students a reflective, questioning intelligence and a willingness to use that intelligence as fully participating members of a critical democracy. (37)

As Durst illustrates in the above passage, critical literacy views writing instruction much differently than current-traditionalism which narrowly focuses its goal on the transferring of academic conventions of style and arrangement from teacher to students. Critical literacy educators, on the other hand, find in teaching an opportunity to encourage the development of critical consciousness, which Freire defines as an awareness of the oppressive elements that are often undetected in social situations (109). This broader educational goal of encouraging critical consciousness does not come at the expense of academic conventions, but rather recognizes these conventions as one of many rhetorical elements of writing.

In fact, critical literacy theorists find fault with the current-traditional focus solely on established grammatical and organizational conventions because such narrow focus ignores the rhetorical nature of writing. Composition theorist Sharon Crowley laments the current-traditional dismissal of invention from writing instruction, which she defines as “the study of all the possible means by which arguments or proofs can be discovered and developed” (2). In a critical literacy-oriented writing class, students have the opportunity to address the rich rhetorical qualities of composition, such as the purposes, audiences, strategies, and development of writing, but current-traditional instruction

ignores these possibilities by reducing composition to the study of arrangement and style. This preoccupation with academic conventions often results in what Lad Tobin describes as “the canned, dull, lifeless student essay that seemed the logical outcome of a rules-driven, teacher-centered curriculum that ignored student interests, needs, and talents” (5).

Critical literacy theorists argue that current-traditional, skills-based writing instruction stifles students’ writing and critical thinking. In Empowering Education, Ira Shor points out, “If the students’ task is to memorize rules and existing knowledge, without questioning the subject matter or the learning process, their potential for critical thought and action will be restricted” (12). While critical thought is not something that students can be forced to learn, instructors can either encourage or discourage it. All too often, current-traditional instructors discourage students from thinking critically by approaching writing as a psuedo-science complete with formulas and modes. Critical literacy theorists have sought to reverse the stifling effects of current-traditionalism by shifting the pedagogical emphasis from product to process, from teacher-centered to student-centered. While current-traditionalism has been challenged for many years, many current-traditional practices and assumptions still exist in classrooms today. The next chapter will examine how the use of modes at CFCC reflect the persistence of current-traditionalism in community college composition.