

## CHAPTER THREE

### RHETORICAL MODES IN DEVELOPMENTAL CLASSES

In Critical Teaching and Everyday Life, Ira Shor compares the post-World War II development of American community colleges to a gold rush, claiming that “in the 60s, two-year campuses sprouted like boom towns, at the rate of one every ten days” (4). “Budget campuses,” as Shor calls them, were established in many towns with the fundamental purpose of providing geographically and financially accessible higher education to working class students. Tuition was a fraction of that at a four-year university, and no dormitories were necessary as students all lived in the nearby community.

Cape Fear Community College was part of this community college movement. According to its web site, the Wilmington Industrial Education Center, as CFCC was first known, was established in 1959 and became Cape Fear Technical Institute when it gained technical institute status on July 1, 1964. Cape Fear Tech became Cape Fear Community College on January 1, 1988, when it was accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award associate degrees. The name changes reflect the shifting mission at CFCC. First established as a technical school, CFCC now offers a college transfer program, which is very popular due to the rising costs of traditional four-year colleges, along with 60 “technology” (ie, technical, or vocational) programs (“Cape Fear Community College-At a Glance”).

Like most community colleges, CFCC has a strong presence in the local community. According to its web site, “Every year, over 27,000 people take classes at Cape Fear Community College,” and the college has four campuses located in the New

Hanover and Pender county areas (“Cape Fear Community College-At a Glance”). CFCC is “one of the oldest and largest members of the North Carolina Community College System,” and its web site describes it as “an open door, multi-campus, comprehensive community college that strengthens the academic, economic, social, and cultural life of the citizens of New Hanover and Pender counties” (“Mission Statement for Cape Fear Community College”). By offering an open admissions policy, a variety of educational programs, and affordable tuition, CFCC exemplifies the general goal of community colleges, which is to provide accessible education to members of the surrounding community.

Open admissions, one of the defining characteristics of community colleges, has strongly influenced composition instruction at CFCC. Although CFCC has an open admissions policy, all incoming students must take ASSET, a standardized placement test, to determine which courses can be taken. If students perform poorly on the reading and writing portions, scoring below 42, they cannot take most of the credit-bearing courses until the necessary completion of developmental English classes, which are designed to help improve their reading and writing skills. Three levels of developmental English classes are offered at CFCC: English 075—Reading and Language Essentials, 085—Reading and Writing Foundations, and 095—Reading and Composition Strategies. Students can place into the different developmental levels depending on their ASSET scores. According to Jill Lahnstein, Chair of the CFCC English Department, developmental students make up roughly a third of the 2,500 students taking English classes at CFCC each semester.

The pedagogical assumption behind the developmental program is that students

who perform poorly on the ASSET tests will rise through the developmental courses and be ready for the core requirements of their academic or vocational programs. ENG 111, the equivalent to a first-year composition course, is a prerequisite for most advanced college transfer courses. Developmental classes count as institutional credit when determining financial aid, but not as transfer or graduation credit. Developmental English courses, particularly 095, are often considered “gatekeeper” courses in which the implied purpose is to not only get students up to speed academically, but to weed out students who just can’t cut it.

The developmental English system resulting from the open admissions policy at CFCC shares similar pedagogical concerns to those brought up during the rise of current-traditionalism. Like instructors during the mid-nineteenth century, contemporary developmental English instructors are faced with the difficult task of acclimating inexperienced students to the academic community, and like those early current-traditional classes, developmental English textbooks dictate the curriculum guidelines. The CFCC developmental English textbooks are organized by rhetorical modes, and the authors’ justifications and presentations of the modes are steeped in current-traditional assumptions.

The developmental English textbooks are not chosen by individual instructors, but rather are determined by committee with strong guidance from the department Chair. English 075 and 085 use the Mosaics series edited by Kim Flachmann. The 075 book is titled Mosaics: Focusing on Sentences in Context and the 085 textbook is titled Mosaics: Focusing on Paragraphs in Context. English 095 uses The Prose Reader edited by Kim Flachmann and Michael Flachmann. All of these textbooks feature nine modes:

description, narration, illustration or example, process analysis, comparison and contrast, division and classification, definition, cause and effect, and argument. Though more elaborated than the traditional modal breakdown of exposition, description, narration, and argumentation, I will continue to refer to these by the acronym EDNA.

Flachmann and Flachmann justify EDNA essays as ways to develop students' thinking abilities. In the Mosaics textbooks, author Kim Flachmann asserts that one of "the unique and exciting features" of the Mosaics series is the teaching of rhetorical modes as "patterns of thought" (xix). The connection between modes of discourse and patterns of thought echoes the faculty psychology assertion that the mind is divided into these modes of thinking. In The Prose Reader, Flachmann and Flachmann offer this justification for teaching modes:

Each rhetorical mode in this book gives us new insight into the process of thinking by providing different options for arranging thoughts and our experiences. The more we know about these options, the more conscious we become of how our minds operate and the better chance we have to improve and refine our thinking skills. (40)

Like my internship mentor, who explained to me that students needed to learn the thought processes of comparison and contrast, Flachmann and Flachmann interpret a student's unfamiliarity with the academic conventions of modal essays as an underdevelopment of thinking abilities. By focusing writing on one specific "thought process" at a time, Flachmann and Flachmann believe that students will better understand and improve that thought process.

Another current-traditional assumption inherent in the Flachmann approach to the

rhetorical modes is the idea that students must study modes separately. Each chapter in the CFCC developmental textbooks features a different rhetorical mode and includes several essays that illustrate the use of the mode. For example, in the 075 Mosaics text, Kim Flachmann provides the essays “A Day in the Homeless Life,” by Colette Russell, and “Casa: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood,” by Judith Ortiz Cofer, as examples of descriptive writing. Russell provides this striking account of a typical morning at the homeless shelter:

At 6:30 a.m. we were ordered to go down to the lobby, where we joined 50 other women either standing or sitting on wooden benches awaiting the light of day. Some talked to themselves. Some shouted angrily. Some sat motionless. Some slept sitting up. Some jumped up and down, walking away and then returning. Some chain-smoked. (591)

This paragraph illustrates quite well the use of description to appeal to the senses of sight, hearing, and smell. Likewise, Cofer’s essay, “Casa: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood,” also offers vivid examples of description:

Maria was a town character, a fat middle-aged woman who lived with her old mother on the outskirts of town....The most peculiar thing about Maria, in my eyes, was that she walked and moved like a little girl though she had the thick body and wrinkled face of an old woman. She would swing her hips in an exaggerated, clownish way, and sometimes even hop and skip up to someone’s house. (596)

Through their use of sensory detail, these essays are clear examples of descriptive writing, and Kim Flachmann presents them in the chapter based on the rhetorical mode of

description. This division of essays into modes reveals the current-traditional assumption that students learn best when writing is reduced to its simplest parts.

In the English 095 textbook, The Prose Reader, Flachmann and Flachmann illustrate this point with an analogy to weightlifting: “Think of it as a muscle you can isolate and strengthen on its own in a weight-training program before you ask it to perform together with other muscles” (41). This practice of isolating skills to improve overall performance can be observed in other areas such as sports. Basketball players focus on certain fundamentals like dribbling, passing and shooting, so they can use these skills together to play a game. The current-traditional approach to EDNA applies the same approach to writing, believing that reading and writing modal essays will strengthen specific rhetorical strategies that, once mastered, may be combined toward the end of the course. Thus, the final chapter in some textbooks is a culmination of all the rhetorical modes. For instance, the last chapter of The Prose Reader is entitled “Combining Patterns.”

Flachmann and Flachmann organize their chapters in this order: description, narration, illustration, process analysis, comparison/contrast, division/classification, definition, cause and effect, and finally argument. In the “Preface to the Instructor” of The Prose Reader, they explain their rationale behind ordering the modes in this way:

Accordingly, the book progresses from selections that require predominantly literal skills (Description, Narration, and Example) through readings involving more interpretation (Process Analysis, Division/Classification, Comparison/Contrast, and Definition) to essays that demand a high degree of analytical thought (Cause/Effect and

Argument/Persuasion). (xxv)

This justification again reveals the current-traditional assumption that students who lack a mastery of academic writing also lack thinking abilities—specifically, those abilities that are valued in academic settings—and that the modes should not only be divided but ordered in this particular sequence, from “simplest” to most “complex,” to improve students’ thinking abilities.

Undoubtedly, Flachmann and Flachmann approach the modes with the good intentions of helping students succeed in college. Writing, however, does not exist as isolated modes even in modal textbooks. In the essay “A Day in the Homeless Life,” Colette Russell does indeed offer a descriptive account of a woman’s experience living in a homeless shelter, but she also employs the chronological movement of narration when recounting a typical day in the homeless shelter. Russell writes, for example, “At 7:30 a.m. the clothing room opened. It was shocking to be told, ‘Throw away what you’re wearing after you get a new outfit.’ No laundry, just toss out yesterday’s garments” (591). She uses description and narration throughout the essay to detail the hardships of homelessness in an effort to persuade readers to agree with her conclusion that “no one should have to live like that” (592). There are three modal strategies at work in this essay: description, narration, and argumentation, yet Flachmann isolates the individual modal “muscle” of description, focusing the study of this essay on the use of sensory detail, and thus overlooking the complexities of this written work. To extend the Flachmann “mode-as-muscle” metaphor, bench presses work out not only pectoral muscles, but biceps, triceps, and back muscles. Just as pure isolation is impossible in weightlifting, so it is in most writing.

Flachmann and Flachmann are aware of this critique and acknowledge the overlap of modes in the “Preface to the Instructor” of The Prose Reader, stating that “‘pure’ rhetorical types rarely exist” (xxiv) and in the Mosaics series, Kim Flachmann admits that “multiple rhetorical strategies are at work in most of these essays” (xx). This acknowledgement of overlap, however, is directed toward instructors, not students, and despite these cursory disclaimers, the grouping of essays into modal categories nevertheless focuses instructors’ and students’ attention solely on isolated modes. Modal overlapping is occasionally acknowledged, but students are never encouraged to view the modes as anything more than categories for which the textbooks group academic essays. Like a basketball player who practices drills but never plays a game, students read and write EDNA essays without being encouraged to encounter the complexities of real writing.

In addition to the forced isolation of modes, current-traditional textbooks often simplify writing by prescribing the modes through the use of model student essays which serve as examples of structure. Comparison and contrast essays are perhaps the most rigidly structured modal essays, with either a point-by-point or subject-by-subject structure. For example, In The Prose Reader, Flachmann and Flachmann feature a student essay entitled “Dormitory Chef,” which contrasts the cooking of tacos and macaroni and cheese based on three criteria of price, preparation, and odor (333). Flachmann and Flachmann focus instruction on organization by prompting students before the essay to try to determine which organizational method the author employs: “first subject by subject, then point by point” (332). In the instructor’s edition of The Prose Reader, Flachmann and Flachmann focus instructors’ attention on the essay’s



organization and transitions of points of contrast by marking in the margins, “Subject A,” “Subject B,” and “Point One,” “Point Two” and so on.

Flachmann and Flachmann offer similar examples of prescribed student writing for each mode in The Prose Reader, and each time instruction is focused on organization. For example, Flachmann and Flachmann present “Follow the Simple Directions” as a student essay that illustrates the mode of process analysis, which, in this case, is performing a home perm. Again, Flachmann and Flachmann focus students’ attention on organization by directing students to “notice that, once the student gives an overview of the process, she discusses the steps one at a time, being careful to follow a logical order and to use clear transitions” (216). Notes are again made in the margins for instructors to point out the steps and transitions of this essay. The first step is “shampooing,” and the second step is “towel-drying,” and so on. Flachmann and Flachmann never use these student essays beyond the purpose of displaying the “proper” structure of a specific mode. They are presented as organizational guidelines or prescriptions, but in their emphasis on arrangement, fail to consider purpose. For example, “Dormitory Chef,” discusses, subject by subject, the differences between cooking macaroni and cheese and tacos, but why?

In fact, the purpose of these essays is to demonstrate mastery of the mode: to contrast macaroni and cheese and tacos. The thesis statement of “Dormitory Chef”—“My choice of which culinary delight to cook on any given night was not as simple a decision as one might imagine” (332)—is essentially a variation on the “There are many differences between X and Y” thesis statement that plagues current-traditional contrast essays. Similarly, in the 085 Mosaics textbook, Kim Flachmann provides as an example

of contrast a paragraph with the topic sentence “Teachers teach differently” (147). This paragraph and “Dormitory Chef” highlight a common result that occurs when modal essays are approached with the current-traditional assumptions that modes should be isolated and organization should be prescribed. The mode becomes the purpose. Even Kim Flachmann, in the preface of the Mosaics series, considers the rhetorical mode an essay’s “primary rhetorical purpose” (xx).

These developmental textbooks illustrate the current-traditional approach to modes by focusing instruction on one isolated mode even though multiple modes are at work. Each textbook teaches modal essays through prescribed formats, and the purpose of these modal essays is simply to perform the modal strategy within the prescribed format. This approach is supported by the current-traditional assumption that academically inexperienced students will best grasp academic writing when it is divided into reductive modal essays.

Many instructors and textbook authors see nothing wrong with this current-traditional modal approach to composition instruction, particularly for students who are unfamiliar with academic writing. They view modal prescriptions as a clear and logical exercise for novice students to engage in academic discourse. Flachmann and Flachmann’s metaphor of isolated modes as muscles illustrates the current-traditional assumption that writing proceeds from part to whole and that in order to write well, students must first master its smallest parts (words, sentences) before moving on to larger units (paragraphs, essays). Even the titles of the Mosaics series—Focusing on Sentences in Context and Focusing on Paragraphs in Context—reveal this assumption. Guess what the next textbook in the Mosaics series is called?

Such an approach, however, is problematic. First, the current-traditional approach as illustrated in the developmental textbooks indicates a lack of confidence in students' thinking abilities. The underlying presumption is that students cannot grasp the real complexities of writing or thinking, and therefore writing must be simplified to the point that it has no purpose or function beyond the classroom. Randy Bomer notes a similarly reductive approach in the U.S. government's adolescent literacy program, which focuses instruction on the "smallest possible atomic linguistic particles" (13). Modes are not quite that small, but when they are taught with current-traditional assumptions, they present fragmented versions of academic writing. Bomer sees narrowing or reductive approaches to writing instruction as misguided because they "never reach beyond school and work" and promote "fear, weakness, and the lowest possible expectations" (13). The current-traditional use of modes is such an approach because it confines "school" writing to modal essays, which don't exist outside of class.

In addition, modes are important rhetorical strategies, but they are usually not rhetorical purposes. To treat them as such is to ignore the way real writers use modes in complex and varied ways and to emphasize format over purpose, leading many instructors to consider content secondary to form. As a result, students can outline the differences between any two subjects as long as they exhibit the proper form, as demonstrated in the essay contrasting macaroni and cheese and tacos in The Prose Reader. During my five years as an English tutor at the CFCC Learning Lab, I have read many student essays which contrast two subjects for the sole purpose of contrasting: Victoria's Secret and Autozone, Reebok and Nike, and skiing versus surfing. One of my UNCW professors told me that her daughter, who had attended CFCC, wrote an essay

detailing the differences between apples and oranges in an attempt to emphasize the absurdity of this pointless assignment. She got an A.

Comparison and contrast is not the only mode that is perverted into purposeless writing. I have read process analysis essays that describe how to pot a plant, make a lemon meringue pie, and change guitar strings. I have read laboriously descriptive essays about students' kitchens, bedrooms, and bathrooms with no rhetorical purpose besides describing. I have read classification essays that catalogue types of boats, surfboards, even boyfriends. While students may be learning to organize their writing through such assignments, this is not the best way to teach writing.

Writing current-traditional modal essays is much like painting by numbers. The sole focus of both of these activities is to follow rigid rules in order to produce a product whose final form is already established. When someone finishes a paint-by-numbers painting, what is learned? How to paint, or how to follow directions? Someone could conceivably paint hundreds of paint-by-numbers paintings and still not be able to compose his or her own painting when faced with a blank canvas. The same can be said for the formulaic approach of current-traditional modes. At CFCC, students may move through all three developmental English classes writing modal essays in the same sequence each semester and never once have to consider for themselves the purposes or structure of their own writing.

The current-traditional approach to modes epitomizes the banking model by focusing on outlines and arrangement. Current-traditional textbooks and instructors encourage if not require formulaic writing and this approach discourages critical thinking. Freire explains the limiting effect of banking on students in this way:

The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (73)

In this case, modal writing presents an inauthentic view of writing, and students are not encouraged to question this fragmentation because they are too busy following prescriptions in an effort to pass the class and move on to their “real” classes. Shor points out, “If a student’s 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).

This restriction of critical thought in developmental English courses has some disturbing political implications which many instructors may find surprising. In Shor’s words, “Education is more than facts and skills. It is a socializing experience that helps make the people who make society” (Empowering Education 15). In all classes, students are learning more than the subject of study. In his critique of capitalist culture, “Ideology and the State,” Louis Althusser argues that students not only learn “know-how” in school, but “also the ‘rules’ of good behaviour” (89). The desired behavior resulting from current-traditionalism is a passive and unquestioning acceptance of authority and rules which makes for easily managed workers, consumers, and citizens. The modes, like all schooling, contribute to the socialization of students, and when taught in a prescribed and fragmented manner, they promote passivity and unquestioning acceptance of authority

which is always outside themselves.

All levels of education are implicit in the socialization of students, but the prescription of writing at the community college level is particularly troubling because the community college system is founded on the democratization of higher education. On its web site, CFCC's vision statement is "Cape Fear Community College: Building a future-oriented world-class workforce and a community of lifelong learners in partnership with regional businesses and agencies." If community colleges are preparing students for the workforce, then what kind of work is developmental English preparing students for? Is this the type of preparation that CFCC's regional business "partners" have in mind for students? By prescribing knowledge and discouraging critical thought, we may be unknowingly taking part in the larger socialization of a population of citizens, workers, and consumers who do not ask questions or think for themselves.

Ira Shor argues that another implicit purpose behind the reductive and narrow instruction often taught in the community college system is to "cool out" the working class. Cooling out is when instruction "depresses the aspirations of non-elite students in an economy with limited rewards. In an unequal society, there is simply not enough to go around, and the bulk of students are encouraged to settle for less while blame is transferred from the college" to the students (Empowering Education 19). Instead of sparking interest in academic pursuits, current-traditional pedagogy presents a fragmented and meaningless impression of academia to community college students. In Critical Teaching and Everyday Life, Shor also makes the intriguing assertion that community colleges actually serve the social role of "warehousing" workers when unemployment is high and claims, "Surplus labor is stored there and regimented" (6).

The current-traditional approach to rhetorical modes that dominate composition instruction in developmental English classes is not a conscious attempt by instructors or textbook authors to oppress working class students, but nevertheless the resulting political implications are alarming.

Modal essays are prescribed for several explicit reasons related to these political and ideological assumptions. As I discussed earlier, many instructors feel that students, particularly those inexperienced with academic writing, need structure. Formulas for writing make composition instruction manageable for students and instructors alike. The modes offer students a map to writing essays, and the modes make instruction easier for instructors as well. Grading rubrics based on the formulas allow teachers to grade papers in a consistent and efficient manner.

In “The Rise and Fall of Rhetorical Modes,” Connors states that “the only teachers still making real classroom use of the modes are those out of touch with current theory” (453), but I disagree. Current-traditionalism is a current theory that, while outdated in the field of pedagogical theory, still informs writing instruction in many real classrooms. In fact, many current-traditional instructors find their pedagogy more sound and more relevant than the latest critical theory because its formulation is perceived to be more closely connected with the realities of the classroom. Critical contemporary theories are thought to be formulated in the vacuum-like setting of academia, without consideration for the direct concerns that influence current-traditional pedagogy like grading loads, class sizes, and efficient evaluation.

Moreover, many writing instructors have received a Master of Arts in literature and have taken few, if any, pedagogy classes. Unaware of contemporary developments

in composition theory, they understandably fall back on their only exposure to pedagogical theory, which occurred when they were students. Without any pedagogical instruction, new teachers are also understandably likely to embrace the curriculum guidelines set forth in the assigned textbooks. Even teachers who are aware of critical literacy pedagogy embrace modes for the same reason that nineteenth-century teachers abandoned the belles lettres approach during the growth of American colleges. They, too, struggle with the question: How does one teach writing to a growing number and variety of students? A quasi-scientific approach such as modal classification gives teachers a concrete format with which to teach and grade. The teaching of prescribed outlines lends itself to a grading rubric that allows teachers to evaluate papers efficiently and consistently.

This reason becomes more understandable as we consider the course requirements of community college instructors. At CFCC, full-time instructors must be on campus 30 hours a week, 25 of which are in class. Instructors are expected to teach five to six classes a semester. With 18 students in each class and five essays per course, instructors can easily find themselves grading 400 essays a semester. The current-traditional approach to rhetorical modes offers an efficient way for instructors to teach and grade writing. Moreover, the current-traditional modal approach provides students with clear guidelines to follow when writing essays.

Whatever the reasons for the persistent current-traditional modal approach, the rhetorical modes provide a fragmented, prescriptive view of writing with alarming pedagogical and political implications. Still, because it is so entrenched in community college classrooms—and for well-intentioned, if not exactly “good” reasons—it is



unrealistic to simply call for their abolition. What I propose instead is a critical approach to the rhetorical modes that encourages students to actively and critically engage in reading and writing, and I will discuss this approach in the next chapter.