

CHAPTER FOUR: SOLUTIONS

The political and pedagogical problems caused by rhetorical modes have led many instructors to seek out alternative approaches to EDNA essays. Even in The Prose Reader, Flachmann and Flachmann offer an alternative table of contents, organizing essays around common themes of family, gender, race, and even education. However, the CFCC English department handbook lists as an objective of English 095 that students “develop ideas through writing strategies such as narration, persuasion, comparison-contrast, illustration, etc.” Because of departmental pressures and mandatory textbooks, many instructors often find the teaching of modes inescapable. But I argue in this last chapter that the modes need not be completely abandoned in order to provide a critical education, one that prepares students to actively make decisions about their own writing. Rhetorical modes can be important tools for writing instruction if separated from the current-traditional assumptions that have long informed their use.

The first step toward a critical approach to modes requires a change in instructors’ perspectives on students. Students are not empty vessels; nor are they incapable of engaging in purposeful writing. Students are humans with already developed thought processes who are capable of improving their abilities to articulate themselves on paper. Instructors must also recognize students’ prior knowledge and uses of language. As Randy Bomer points out, students’ “practices are purposeful and sophisticated, and they use literacy to do the kinds of things people have always done with literacy” (13). The current-traditional assumption that writing must be reduced to simplified forms or isolated parts in order to serve inexperienced academic writers reveals a vote of no confidence. Students, aware of their instructors’ presumptions and exposed only to a

narrow, skills-based approach to academic writing, often have no confidence in their own writing abilities because they have never been encouraged to write with purpose. This lack of confidence in students' writing abilities also reveals instructors' lack of confidence in their own abilities to teach writing. In addition to changing their views on students' abilities and prior knowledge, instructors seeking a critical approach must recognize student writing as rhetorical and not only acknowledge the overlap of modes in writing, but embrace it. Contrary to current-traditional assumptions, students are capable of studying multiple modes, and an explicit study of modal overlapping provides an opportunity for students to study how these strategies are actually used to achieve specific purposes.

What would a critical approach to modes look like in practice? The changes would be simple and manageable. The same essays found in any current-traditional textbook can be used; however, the study of these essays would not focus solely on the characteristics of one mode (even if that mode is featured prominently), but rather on a specific purpose and how modal strategies are used to achieve this purpose.

In the description chapter of The Prose Reader, Flachmann and Flachmann state that description “paints a verbal picture that helps the reader understand or share a sensory experience through the process of ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’” (38). The essays in this chapter do indeed illustrate excellent examples of description, but instead of focusing study completely on the identification of sensory details, a critical approach to the mode of description also considers the purposes. Writers describe things for a variety of reasons, and to encourage students to think critically, instructors should explore how description can not only paint a “verbal picture” but also fulfill a purpose. One way to do

this is to ask students to find examples of effective description, such as menus and advertisements, in their everyday lives that serve specific purposes, like persuasion. Such an approach promotes an active, critical connection between the students and academic writing. Focusing on purpose is an approach that works when reading most modal essays with the exception of pointless student essays like the aforementioned “Dormitory Chef” in The Prose Reader. That essay, like many current-traditional student essays, serves no purpose other than performing a specific modal exercise—contrasting tacos and macaroni and cheese—and could perhaps be studied as “what not to do” when using modal strategies.

Once instructors establish a clear, authentic rhetorical purpose for writing as opposed to a prescribed modal one, students naturally attempt to use the appropriate rhetorical strategies. For example, in an English 085 class, I asked students to write essays with the clear purpose of discussing something that they thought should be changed. Purpose-based assignments like this provide instructors with the opportunity to teach the modes as rhetorical strategies that students can choose from to best make their point. One student argued that parking meters around the CFCC downtown campus should be removed and began her essay with a narrative that vividly expressed her daily frustration with the parking situation at CFCC. After this introductory narrative, she contrasted the parking situation at CFCC with that of a nearby community college. She also employed a cause and effect analysis to argue that parking meters disrupted her educational experience. The author employed a variety of modes to make her point without any rigid prescriptions to do so. Many peer readers related to the narrative and viewed that as the most effective strategy used in the essay.

While her essay had weaknesses (one peer reader told the writer to simply park in the student parking lot instead), these weaknesses actually provided the students with an opportunity to discuss the effectiveness of different modal strategies that she employed. When students begin choosing their own rhetorical strategies, they are obliged to evaluate the effectiveness of these modal strategies as they work toward their overall rhetorical purpose. In current-traditional instruction, this type of active, critical thinking is rarely encouraged; it has not meaningful context.

Another purposeful, multi-modal assignment that I have used is a movie review. I ask students to review one of their favorite movies with the explicit purpose of persuading their classmates to want to see this movie. After a final peer-editing session, students vote on the most persuasive movie review, and we watch that movie in class. The purpose of this assignment is clear—to persuade classmates to vote for their movie review—and students make their own choices of how to best use the rhetorical strategies to achieve this purpose. While a movie review could be classified as an argumentative essay, many modes are at work to achieve the purpose of persuasion, for example, description, narration, contrast, illustration, and definition. Peer-evaluation is a significant part of this assignment not only because it provides a real audience, but because also it allows students to consider how other students employed rhetorical strategies.

These are just two examples of purposeful writing assignments that provide rhetorical agency for students to choose multiple rhetorical strategies, but, of course, there are many reasons for writing that would make worthwhile assignments. Again, this approach requires confidence in the students to actually consider the effectiveness of

rhetorical strategies. Instead of banking essay formulas, instructors must allow students to choose from the range of rhetorical strategies—some of which may not have modal equivalents—and learn how to employ effectively and organize these rhetorical strategies from their own mistakes and successes. Unlike current-traditionalism, which views modes as kinds of essays, a critical approach studies the modes as strategies which recognizes the rhetorical context of writing.

Many instructors might find this approach initially uncomfortable because it eschews the rigid prescriptions that seem to make teaching writing manageable, and to be sure, it can get messy. Like painting-by-numbers, writing-by-modes has traditionally produced clear, orderly products, but that prescriptive approach hasn't taught students how to write as much as it has reinforced how to follow directions. Without prescriptions, students are going to make mistakes, but with clear, rhetorical purposes they will learn, for themselves, how to choose and organize the modes effectively, which is an organic concern of writers: not passively following a formula.

In addition, when reading essays, students will be able to actively evaluate the rhetorical strategies that writers use to achieve their rhetorical purposes. Moreover, instructors will be freed of the tedious task of counting paragraphs and criteria for specific modal requirements. Even if it may be uncomfortable initially, a critical approach to modes would make the developmental English class as much about the exchange of ideas among a community of writers as the checking of papers for grammar and organization. By approaching modes as rhetorical strategies not purposes, students will have the authority to make choices about their writing, and making decisions, not just following directions, is the essential action required of members of a democracy.

