

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"What are two things we can contrast?" I asked as I stood in front of a class of twenty-two first-year composition students.

This was my first time teaching a rhetorical mode, and I was doing so as part of my graduate internship at Cape Fear Community College. I was familiar with rhetorical modes from my undergraduate English classes where I had written several expository, descriptive, narrative, and argumentative (EDNA for short) essays, but I had never given them much thought until I found myself introducing the comparison-contrast essay, a subcategory of exposition along with definition, process analysis, cause and effect, classification, and example.

After fielding such suggestions as "skiing versus surfing," "Duke versus Carolina basketball," and "off-shore versus on-shore fishing," I finally settled on "fine dining versus fast food." My internship mentor, sitting in the back of the classroom, nodded approvingly. I wrote both topics on the board, drew a line between them, and asked the students to tell me differences between the two. After writing the phrases "Big Mac," "loud children," "\$4.99 combo," and "stinky bathrooms" on the fast food side, I wrote phrases like "small portions," "fresh vegetables," "dim lighting," and "steak" on the fine dining side.

After the students generated specific differences between the two kinds of eating establishments, I asked the class if we could group these examples into general categories. We chose quality, cost, and atmosphere as the criteria to contrast fine dining and fast food and assigned our examples to the appropriate criteria. I then demonstrated how an essay could be written using two different outlines: a point-by-point contrast or a

subject-by-subject contrast. The class came to an end, and I informed students that their next writing assignment would be a four-page essay comparing and contrasting any two subjects of their choice using three criteria or categories. Their drafts would be due in a week.

As I erased the board, I couldn't help questioning this assignment. The lesson focused completely on organization and, with the requirement of three criteria, closely resembled the five-paragraph structure that dominates high school composition. Moreover, the point of these essays went no further than to illustrate the differences between two subjects. What were students actually learning from writing an essay contrasting subjects like fine dining and fast food? They already knew the differences between fine dining and fast food. Was it really necessary for students to compose an essay that methodically contrasts these types of subjects? What was the purpose of this assignment? I decided to ask my mentor what she thought students learned from the comparison-contrast essay.

"The thought process of compare and contrast," she answered as we hustled out into the hallway. "Most students don't know how to generate criteria for compare-contrast, much less articulate the process in a four-page paper. They need to learn how to do that." I disagreed but kept silent. While students may not know how to write compare and contrast essays, surely they already know how to compare and contrast. They make daily decisions using this thought process when determining, for example, where to eat, what to wear, or what movie to watch. The underlying assumption behind my supervising instructor's explanation for the comparison-contrast essay was that students lacked the ability to contrast.

During my internship at CFCC, I sensed that something was wrong not just with comparison-contrast essays, but with all rhetorical modes. My misgivings about their pedagogical effectiveness have developed as I find myself now teaching and tutoring students in an English department which values the modal approach. As a writing tutor in the CFCC Learning Lab, I have read hundreds of student essays, many of which share the same problem: an absence of rhetorical purpose other than adhering to the modal conventions set forth by the teachers and textbooks. When instructors emphasize modal divisions, the modes become the purpose: the point of a description essay is to describe something, the purpose of a contrast essay is to contrast something, and so on. Such assignments place emphasis solely on mode and ignore content, and students can contrast any two subjects so long as they demonstrate the differences using three criteria.

These divisions also imply that a piece of writing contains only one rhetorical strategy when writing often employs many modes simultaneously. For example, this thesis begins in the narrative mode but elsewhere employs various rhetorical strategies such as argumentation, contrast, definition, process, and cause and effect. When taught as separate prescribed essays, these modes can discourage students from writing with a combination of rhetorical strategies. Instructors usually require students to follow the conventions of one individual mode, and students are more concerned with adhering to modal prescriptions than with engaging in organic, purposeful writing.

This “divide and conquer” approach to rhetorical modes is most prevalent in writing courses designed for academically inexperienced students such as the developmental English classes at CFCC, which raises several questions. How did writing come to be divided into EDNA? Why are these categories so prevalent in developmental

English composition classes? What do students really learn from writing essays which focus primarily, if not completely, on organization? What assumptions are being made about students' abilities to write and think when instructors assign modal essays? Furthermore, can the modes be approached in a manner that avoids the pedagogical problems that discussed above?

In Chapter Two, I will begin to address these questions by surveying the history of American composition instruction and focusing on the pedagogical shifts from belletrism to current-traditionalism to critical literacy. Current-traditionalism is the pedagogical philosophy which directly contributed to the popularization of rhetorical modes in the nineteenth century and which still continues to inform many instructors' use of the modes. I will then outline the goals, assumptions, and practices of critical literacy, a twentieth-century pedagogical movement, which has developed in response to the pedagogical problems and political implications of current-traditionalism. With a historical perspective of these pedagogical developments, we can better understand contemporary composition instruction, which draws from the characteristics and values of belletrism, current-traditionalism, and critical literacy.

In Chapter Three, I will use the lens of critical literacy to examine the rhetorical modes at CFCC, particularly in developmental English classes where the textbooks embrace current-traditional pedagogy. CFCC is in many ways a typical community college. Most of the writing textbooks at CFCC are based on rhetorical modes. In this chapter, I will explain, through the work of critical literacy pioneer Paulo Freire, how these textbooks with their current-traditional approach actually hinder the development of student writing by presenting the modes as rigid essay formats.

In the last chapter, I argue that the modes could be more useful and effective if separated from their current-traditional ties and embraced with a critical literacy approach that encourages students to examine how modes are actually used to achieve organic rhetorical purposes. This approach requires an awareness of how current-traditionalism has confined contemporary writing instruction. As a pedagogy, it discourages critical thought and perpetuates damaging assumptions about writing and learning, yet like many traditions, this philosophy is deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of many educators. A reevaluation of pedagogical philosophies can lead instructors to use modes, not as prescribed formulas which simplify student writing, but as critical tools that sincerely welcome students to actively participate in academic discourse.