

Teaching Philosophy | Allen Brizee, PhD, Loyola University Maryland

My teaching is informed by classical and contemporary theories of rhetoric and education. I seek to move students from theory, reflection, and research into community-based writing through a process that overlaps learning, discovery, and engagement. From my sixteen years of teaching, I have found that students can best prepare themselves for the types of writing they will face by developing a composing process that considers the ever changing rhetorical situations of their work. Therefore in my courses, students use theory, reflection, research, and practice to grow into proactive rhetors, moving from writing to informed action. The following three concepts from classical rhetoric guide my teaching: *kairos*, *stasis*, and *heuriskô*.

Kairos: Doing the Right Thing at the Right Time

It is important to do the right thing at the right time, enacting what the ancient Greeks called *kairos*. In their book, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, Crowley and Hawhee state that *kairos* "...was so important for ancient thinkers that it became a mythical figure" (38).

The Judeo-Christian tradition has adapted the ancient idea of *kairos*, and today many denominations—including Jesuit organizations—use *kairos* as a foundation for programs focused on the value of "God's time." Even though *kairos* does not have an precise English term, the idea of *kairos* influences contemporary writing studies and my idea of the rhetorical situation: "*Kairos* is thus a 'window' of time during which action is most advantageous" (37).

I try to equip my students with a variety of tools that they can use depending on the context of their call to write. My writing courses begin with classical rhetoric; students learn about rhetorical situations—purpose, audience, context, *kairos*, etc.—and the elements of rhetoric, including Aristotle's proofs (*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*). Students use rhetorical analysis, including the logical fallacies, to study the strategies that authors use in various types of discourse. Though these ideas seem deeply philosophical, I always connect theory with practice by asking students to use their skills to analyze situations and discourses that influences their lives.

For example, service-learning students from my WR220, Introduction to Rhetoric course used careful analysis to study the rhetorical situation involved with their Richnor Springs service-learning project, and they acted *kairotically* by fulfilling community partners' needs. The group began the semester by reading classical rhetoricians, such as Aristotle and Cicero. I also introduced them to Isocrates, who opened the first school of rhetoric in Athens and who used rhetoric and philosophy to prepare his students for civic life. After reading and writing about classical rhetoric, students moved on to readings about York Road neighborhoods and challenges facing Baltimore. Service-learning students began writing about and conducting research with Richnor Springs. This research included text- and Internet-based inquiry, as well as empirical methods: interviews, and observations from community meetings. Conducting this type of research allowed my students to learn about the community's needs.

Through their research, my students discovered that two of the most difficult challenges facing Richnor Springs are communication and organization, which dovetailed nicely with the rhetoric and writing lessons of the course. To address these communication and organization needs, service-learning students decided to help community members compose reusable neighborhood meeting signs and collect updated, accurate information for Richnor Springs' LiveBaltimore web page. Students in my other courses, WR305, Writing for the Web, WR325, Rhetoric of Professional Writing, and WR387, Technical Writing, have subsequently worked with Richnor Springs to develop their own community website. The print and online documents my students develop with Richnor Springs, therefore, are well researched and co-authored with their community partners. In addition, the documents address complex audiences that include readers from multiple socio-economic backgrounds. Lastly, the deliverables fulfill the community's needs and the learning aims of writing courses.

Rather than assuming that they know exactly what community members needed, a mistake made by some well-intentioned academics, my students work with Richnor Springs in collaborative ways to discover the problems facing the neighborhood. Rather than developing the fliers and the community website content in isolation, my students work with Richnor Springs to compose documents that help citizens more effectively communicate with one another and more effectively organize their community. In this way, I believe my students connect theory, reflection, research, and social justice to act *kairotically*, combining words with deeds. The Richnor Springs website is also available here: <http://www.richnorsprings.org/index.html>.

Stasis: *Power with, Versus Power Over*

I believe in using writing to build power *with* people rather than using writing to build power *over* people. *Stasis* theory, a collaborative method of pre-writing, is an effective process for writing and working *with* people. From classical rhetoric, we learn that Aristotle and Hermagoras developed *stasis* theory to help rhetoricians conduct thorough analysis and to move from theory to action. Specifically, *stasis* theory asks people to investigate four elements of an issue at hand: the facts, the definition of the issue, the seriousness of the issue, and the policy to address the issue. These four steps work well as a generative heuristic that helps foster analysis and cooperative teamwork appropriate for composition, rhetoric, and technical writing courses. Moreover, integrating the *stases* into my curriculum shifts the focus of the writing class from purely eristic approaches to rhetoric—in order to win an argument, your opponent must lose—to more collaborative ideas of rhetoric. These cooperative approaches emphasize building power *with* one another instead of building power *over* one another—mirroring the social justice ideology of my scholarship and pedagogy.

I came to the power *with* approach as a result of my first semester teaching composition at Virginia Tech. After studying rhetoric and writing for 16 weeks, I asked my class to explain rhetoric; their answer stunned me. One of my best students replied, "Rhetoric is using language to get people to do what you want." My other students nodded in agreement. I concluded that despite a semester of conscientious instruction, I had fashioned twenty bloodthirsty sophists (classical rhetoricians considered amoral by philosophers like Isocrates, Aristotle, and Plato). As I continued teaching writing, I

researched other approaches to rhetoric and eventually came across Isocrates' theory of *logos dunamis*, which roughly translates to *power with*. This theory stands in contrast to *logos hegemon*, which basically means *power over*. Since discovering these discursive approaches to rhetoric, I have asked my students to use their skills to build knowledge collaboratively rather than using rhetoric "to get people to do what you want."

An example of how *logos dunamis* impacts my pedagogy emerges from one section of my WR100, Effective Writing course where a student was researching people experiencing homelessness in Baltimore. Rather than have students begin with a thesis paper—students tend to merely collect data to support their position while ignoring other information—they begin with research questions. The research question driven paper asks students to reflect on their own experiences with the issue they are investigating and to reflect on their research process. During this reflective process, my student wrote "The homeless are infesting the city, adding to urban blight." The wording and tone of this statement shocked me, but I used the situation to teach my student how language can be used incorrectly to build power *over* people rather than using it to build power *with* people.

I incorporated the CCSJ's "Using Just Language" handout as a reference and worked with the student to understand how his statement was misinformed and hurtful. I explained that even though his intentions were good, his rhetoric was destructive rather than collaborative. I also explained that his comments would hurt those experiencing homelessness rather than helping them because the word "infesting" makes people sound like pests, which is de-humanizing. When the student began work on his proposal assignment, I encouraged him to investigate and explain solutions that would build collaboration between Loyola students and local citizens. While the student's final project was not the best in the class, I believe that he made considerable progress from perceiving people who experience homelessness as pests to better understanding that mental health and larger economic issues heavily impact our at-risk citizens. The student's work proposed a fundraiser at Loyola, and since he had organized such efforts in his hometown, he was able to articulate the process clearly and concisely. My student used the *stases* to research the problem and then articulated a viable solution that would foster productive collaboration, or *logos dunamis*.

Heuriskô: *Discovery through Research*

I believe in using careful, ethical research as a method of discovery and invention. In her essay, "Kairotic Encounters," Hawhee notes that, "the concept of invention comes from the Greek verb *heuriskô*, which may be translated 'I discover'..." (17). Influenced by this approach to discovery, but also influenced by empirical methods, I follow a teaching process that integrates theory, research, and practice—*praxis*. Therefore, I am guided by my own research on the interaction of humans and technology (usability testing) and my work with the community. Moreover, my concept of *praxis* is guided by the ancients' notion of building "copiousness of information" where a rhetor collects as much information as possible before composing a speech or document. Building copiousness of information is equally important today, for example, when students investigate the use of technology to build community.

An example of my students using *heuriskô* to develop copiousness of information emerges from a project that spanned my fall 2010 WR325 and my spring 2011 WR220 courses. More recently, the concept of *heuriskô* helped me teach WR305 in the fall of 2012. Students from WR325 and WR220 conducted research on and began designing a new website for the Writing Department, while students from WR305 designed and tested their online writing portfolios.

One reason I was hired by the Writing Department was to integrate more technology into the program's culture and pedagogy. To this end, I serve as the department's webmaster. As such, I was tasked to revise our website, but rather than take this on as a personal project, I used my previous experience as the Purdue University OWL Coordinator¹ to integrate the department website project into my pedagogy. My experience as Purdue OWL Coordinator taught me the importance of collecting a lot of information on web projects, especially when the website represents an organization with many stakeholders and a complex audience. To help my students learn these lessons, the department website project required students to conduct research on the organization and page design of successful websites. This research consisted of reading about design elements like contrast, alignment, repetition, and proximity—concepts influencing design that emerge from cognitive psychology (Gestalt theory). My students also conducted research on human-technology interaction, also known as usability.

Since the department website has many users—current and future majors, parents, faculty, and university administrators—my students conducted a series of interviews with this complex audience to determine what they needed and expected from our website. Building on the work completed by my WR325 course, my WR220 student group actually designed a rough draft of the department website. To measure the effectiveness and usability of the site, my WR220 students tested their draft using industry standard empirical methods, such as task-based protocols, that require research participants to find information on a website. My students also used Likert scale feedback surveys to measure participants' impressions of their draft.

Rather than completing the department website project by myself, I used the site revision as an opportunity to teach *heuriskô* to my students. Before they began the project, WR325 and WR220 students thought that web designers worked in isolation. To foster collaboration with one another and stakeholders, and to help students learn how to use inquiry as a method of rhetorical invention (pre-writing), I required them to conduct textual and empirical research on web design best practices. As a result, both student groups helped me redesign the department website.

More recently, I have used the concept of *heuriskô* to help students develop their online writing portfolios in WR305. In WR305, I helped students refine their empirical research skills and provided them an opportunity to work with industry standard technology. To achieve this, I first worked with Associate Dean Suzanne Keilson to purchase an eye tracking system called EyeGuide. The EyeGuide system helps students collect data and capture eye movements when conducting usability testing on their web

¹ Purdue OWL: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>.

portfolios. This information allows students to revise their portfolios, optimizing them for future employers and online readers. To review students' writing portfolios developed in my WR305 course, please visit the Writing Department website page, Student News here: <http://www.loyola.edu/academic/writing/student-news.aspx>.

As a Major Advisor, my work with students is guided by the three concepts outlined above, but I also enjoy and find deeply rewarding the mentor relationship that is often so vital in young people's lives. Some of the most important lessons teachers can impart are the lessons not covered in class. For example, I often discuss life-work balance with students, along with professionalization skills and information about graduate school and the workplace. Sometimes, however, students need more than academic lessons as they grapple with the challenges of young adulthood. This semester, I spent considerable time mentoring a student who has been struggling with Loyola's difficult curriculum. I first had this student in WR100, and he has since taken a number of writing courses. Though I have not had him in any of my courses recently, he often stops by my office so that we can talk. This semester, he was diagnosed with a learning disability, which we discussed at length. Most recently, his father passed away, and so we again spent a lot of time discussing this situation, a life challenge I had to face last fall when my own father passed away. More than teaching writing or student skills, teaching life lessons can sometimes be the assistance that helps young people work through challenging times. This summer, I am looking forward to accepting greater mentor responsibility as a Core Advisor.

Through my teaching and research, I have found that a keen understanding of rhetoric and a firm commitment to using discourse to build knowledge collaboratively helps my students write in a variety of contexts. Moreover, a thorough and principled approach to inquiry provides my students with the research skills they will need to solve problems and communicate effectively with others, supporting Loyola's goal of helping students achieve *eloquentia perfecta*. Through advising, I have found that an empathetic and mature approach to mentorship can help students work through challenging situations but to also accept responsibility and move forward with their lives. My hope is that my students, through their work with writing and civic engagement, as well as a discerning approach to life, can move into adulthood as responsible members of our society. In this way, my pedagogy supports Loyola's Jesuit mission of forming men and women for others.