



Window Washing or War and Peace: Critical Rhetoric, Critical Revision, and Critical Discourse Analysis in Student Writing

Gae Lyn Henderson, Utah Valley University

- Writing assignments carry political ramifications even when they attempt neutrality; students should learn that all writing occurs within larger contexts of power. To accomplish this goal, I advocate instruction derived from practices of critical rhetoric, critical revision, and critical discourse analysis.
- Rhetoric education, based on Donald Lazere's Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy, trains students not only for academic writing, but for citizenry. Students write what David Bartholomae calls "practical criticism," critically revising their own texts. Also, students may practice the methodology of critical discourse analysis, as prescribed by Thomas Huckin, in a course that integrates civic literacy with introductory CDA assignments.

My son Mark attends a research university not too far distant from the university where I teach. One recent afternoon, he stopped by my home to ask if I would help him "proofread" a paper, an assignment in his advanced technical writing course. He handed me a list of written instructions. The list advised me to set up a ladder next to my garage, gather up implements he provided—razor-blade scraper, squeegee, window-cleaning solution, rags—climb the ladder, and, step-by-step, thoroughly clean a lime-stained (definitely dirty) window. I managed to scrape the window in a different direction than he had hoped, so he found some items in his list



that could be clarified. When the window was sparkling clean, I asked him if he thought the paper assignment, one that asked him to carefully delineate a process with which he was familiar, was worthwhile. Of course, I realized immediately why Mark wrote about this particular process—washing windows has been his means of supporting himself and his young family during college. Don't misunderstand; I could clearly see not only the blue sky gleaming through the window, but also definite pedagogical value in Mark's efforts. Writing "Washing Lime-Stained Windows" helped Mark practice sequential thinking, required the creation of exact and descriptive detail, and, perhaps, in future incarnations, could provide more than one window washer with informative instruction about properly deploying razor blades, and what kinds of product works best for lime problems. In assessing the overall value of the writing/reviewing/discussing/rewriting experience, I can't ignore the fact that Mark volunteered to clean more windows in exchange for my "proofreading," or the realization that I'm writing about his paper now. But in answer to my question, Mark admitted that he felt the assignment itself seemed to lack substance: "It's too simple." Yes.

Now, suppose you were Mark's technical writing teacher, how would you critically engage him to follow up on the process paper assignment? What questions could you ask? Mark, why did you choose to write about window washing? Do you equate the word "process" with physical labor? What about writing the paper itself—did you also follow a process that could be explained to an audience? Could your work-as-writing be replicated by someone following a paper-writing process you describe? What aspects of your writing process, or your window-washing process, seem to elude description? Does the window-washing process differ, in some essential way, from the process of writing? What is the relationship between physical labor and education? How do you view your entrepreneurial window-washing business in terms of class issues? Do you expect that your



education will enable you to transcend physical labor? And, perhaps, why do you think your mother, a college English professor, has such dirty windows?

Any one of these questions provides a way of problematizing, or even politicizing, a simple process paper. Writing teachers often debate whether writing instruction is or should be political. I often argue that writing is inherently a political act. But perhaps the process paper is a good example of the attempt to depoliticize writing; a straightforward assignment, stripped clean of the complicating questions that might make it interesting or worthy of collegiate attention. If writing instruction becomes merely a matter of helping students acquire a set of neutral skills, a portable stripped-down window-washing kit of various implements and a how-to list for using them, then, frankly, I wonder if such teaching is worth doing or if I would be able to stay awake reading papers. Further, the very notion of writing-as-skill-set, one that can be taught, mastered, and transported, carries with it an inescapable conservative politics. “Washing Lime-Stained Windows” unquestioningly assumes that skills can be textually transferred and taught. It replicates a world where expertise is transparently acquired by readers who carefully study texts. It is perhaps worth considering whether novice window-washers in training, or some (professional) window washers, may not read English, or for that matter not read?

While I agree that information-dispensing practices students develop in writing class may benefit future schoolwork, jobs, community and personal life, I would suggest, based both on my years teaching writing and my rhetorical/poststructuralist leanings, that rhetoric’s persuasive roots infuse all writing tasks, even those that rigorously practice evenhandedness and claim political neutrality. More importantly, essential discernments—intellectual, critical-thinking, and political—may also support one’s toolkit (window-washing or writing), or, rather, challenge its boundaries and contents, developing habits of mind that become considerably more worthy of transport. I argue here for a



specific approach to writing instruction, one derived from practices of critical rhetoric, critical revision, and critical discourse analysis. These methodologies stimulate students to develop crucial intellectual dispositions and lead to rigorous writing outcomes.

Education in rhetoric not only prepares students to write academic discourse, it prepares them to critically assess public/political discourse and media propaganda; they become more informed, participating consumers and citizens as they come to understand the relationships among power, knowledge, and discourse. Even the teacher-student relationship entails a power differential, and such power relations always complicate the production, transmission and reception of knowledge. The act of writing is never pure, or untainted by the context within which it is enmeshed.¹ It is important, therefore, that students understand the workings of power inherent in discourse and in education itself, from whatever source that education emerges (school, government, political institution, church, family). If students develop such rhetorical awareness, and then appropriately contextualize their writing, it becomes more focused and rigorous. Student writers may practice critical rhetoric, first of all, by studying and analyzing their own writing over a course of study; revision provides opportunities to ask further questions, problematize ideas, and complicate thinking. Secondly, students may learn to conduct critical discourse analysis (CDA). I suggest here that a writing course that integrates civic literacy with CDA, when carefully gauged to course level and goals, provides a specific methodology that enables students to write substantive and thoughtful critique of public discourse and media propaganda.

Critical Rhetoric Education

Wayne Booth in his 2004 *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric* states that rhetoric “[a]t its worst . . . is our most harmful miseducator—except for violence. But at its best—when we learn to listen to the ‘other,’ then listen to ourselves and thus manage to respond in a way that produces genuine dialogue—it is our primary resource for avoiding violence



and building community” (xi-xii). What is rhetoric education at its best, as Booth defines it? He insists that students must learn to distinguish among sources, to evaluate and understand the “flood of misinformation” with which they are inundated. He centers *The Rhetoric*, a culminating book of his distinguished career, around this concern: “A citizenry not habituated to thoughtful argument about public affairs, but rather trained to ‘believe everything supporting my side’ and ‘disbelieve everything supporting the bad side,’ is no longer a citizenry but a house of gullibles” (89). One of many proposals Booth offers is for teaching research. He acknowledges that many first-year composition teachers are at the forefront in helping students “join a community of mutually trusting inquirers,” much in the tradition of Mina Shaughnessy’s work in open access education (92). Booth notes, however, that today’s legislators, rather than inquiring into the how-tos of teaching literacy, focus requirements on drilling specific information to pass standardized tests. He points out that educators are “forced to stress regurgitation of daily fact-menus, rather than critical thinking and productive arguing” (94). His experience, in contrast, is that the most valuable and rewarding result of rhetoric education occurs as students “manage to practice what Peter Elbow calls ‘the believing game’—penetrating the opponent’s world so far as really to feel what it would be like to *believe* what before had seemed a totally absurd idea” (102).

Other contemporary rhetoricians echo this sentiment. Richard Weaver, in his analysis of the famous Scopes “Monkey Trial,” argues for the difficult, yet invaluable goal of “education in any age,” to create what he names “a Summa Dialectica. . . . [T]he educated people of our country would have to be so trained that they could see the dialectical possibility of the opposites of the beliefs they possess” (124). More recently, Donald Lazere argues in his 2005 “Postmodern Pluralism and the Retreat from Political Literacy” that English studies has lapsed from its responsibility to teach critical thinking and writing in favor of postmodernism. Lazere wants to follow in the tradition of Shaughnessy’s literacy education, yet he notes that postmodern



critics label her work “elitist, teacher-centered, and concerned only with mechanical correctness” (272). Lazere finds this critique of Shaughnessy symptomatic of “a larger assault on academic discourse and the authority of teachers initiating students into that discourse” (272). He believes academic argument prefigures and underlies all rational public discourse and wants to “integrate [academic argument] . . . with feminist, multicultural, working-class, and national/international political concerns” (272). Such politicized pedagogies are, however, unfortunately critiqued by postmodernists as authoritarian attempts to indoctrinate students into a specific “political ideology” (272). Lazere challenges such reductive critique, claiming with Shaughnessy that academic discourse is “the common language not only of the university but of the public and professional world outside” (qtd. in Lazere 273). Lazere points out that writing instruction, and the broader field of English Studies, has “defaulted on critical thinking” (264). In one example, while he admires Carol Gilligan’s work in women’s ways of knowing, which “judiciously modified the gender bias” in her predecessors [Lawrence Kohlberg and William Perry], one consequence of her work is that “the notion of stage-development of moral or intellectual reasoning was dropped like a hot potato in English Studies” (264). Similarly, the important critique of various oppressive consequences of Enlightenment reason conducted by the Frankfurt School and other postmodernists, “got misinterpreted as a rejection of reason altogether—a classic case of throwing out the baby with the bath water” (264-65). Lazere argues that “it is precisely higher order reasoning that is needed to refute the logical fallacies in sexist, racist, class-biased, or jingoistic rhetoric . . . manipulating sociocentric emotion” (265).

I agree with Booth, Weaver, and Lazere that the promise of rhetoric education is located in pedagogy that teaches critical reading and writing. The question is: what theoretical model informs such pedagogy and what classroom practices result? One helpful and productive theoretical frame for rhetoric education is Raymie



McKerrow's model of critical rhetoric. He identifies various principles that guide a critical rhetor in both analysis and invention: the critic doesn't just observe; s/he composes in response to careful observation and analysis (101). Two of McKerrow's principles particularly applicable to pedagogy are

- The discourse of power is material.
- Rhetoric constitutes *doxastic* rather than *epistemic* knowledge (102-103).²

If student writers begin to observe how material practices such as writing are a means of enacting power in society, they see writing's potential for manipulation, indoctrination, and, at times, successful intervention. If they recognize the distinction between *doxa* (belief/opinion) and *episteme* (propositional logic), they understand rhetoric's potential for persuading through means of *ethos* and *pathos* when *logos* falls short. Further, Lazere's recent textbook, *Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy*, provides teachers and students with specific materials to develop rhetorical awareness and practice critical reading and writing skills. For example, the inside front cover of his text is a Rhetoric Checklist that students can use in analyzing both sources and their own writing. Further, in his chapter on creating effective argument he identifies, and provides examples for, the following criteria. A good argument:

- Is well supported
- Distinguishes fact from opinion, takes care to verify facts, and expresses informed opinions
- Is cogently reasoned
- Is relevant, consistent, and free of fallacies
- Is well-balanced, fair minded, and qualified



- Effectively refutes opposing arguments (43-51)

Teachers expect that students studying such criteria will learn (through practice) to emulate similar careful strategies in their own writing. These strategies in fact articulate a definition of *logos*, *episteme*, or rational argument. Yet students also find that Lazere devotes much of the remainder of his text to analyzing the fallacies that pervade public discourse, fallacies that students must learn to recognize, sift through and avoid if they are to write rational arguments. Obviously human beings are particularly susceptible to the nonrational appeals he warns against, such as bias, culturally conditioned assumptions, ethnocentrism, overgeneralization, stereotyping, prejudice, authoritarianism, conformity, rationalization, compartmentalization, semantic manipulations, and a long list of logical fallacies (from Lazere's chapter titles). Rhetoric education thus must include study of multiple means of persuasion that impact political realities of life, including decisions about war and peace. Rhetorical literacy demands that language be recognized for its politics—its tendency, in George Orwell's phrase, to mark “the defense of the indefensible” (“Politics” 363):

political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. . . . People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. (363)

Orwell asserts that “there is no such thing as ‘keeping out of politics.’ All issues are political issues”; especially, he implies, the practice of writing (363-64).³



Critical Rhetoric in Student Writing: Revision as Practical Criticism

As students develop rhetorical and critical skills through studying McKerrow's principles of rhetoric and information provided in Lazere's text, they begin to discern the inherent politics of writing. Teachers may even share with students the debates among scholars as to how and whether such realizations apply to pedagogy with the goal of helping students re-vision and rewrite their initial work.

In an essay called *Why I Write*, George Orwell asserts that all writing is political—"[u]sing the word 'political' in the widest possible sense" (392). Writing always entails a "[d]esire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude" (392-93). Yet, it is often purported that writing can and should be taught in academic settings as a neutral, depoliticized practice. Some suggest that a purist approach to writing is necessary to keep the focus centralized and away from other distracting (contaminating?) content. To use an analogy from literary studies, the field in the early twentieth century reacted against courses/criticism that made authorial biography or philosophy the subject matter by adopting new-critical approaches that deliberately ignored context. But omitting context can be problematic. Burke, for example, championed the art for art's sake perspective in his earliest writings, but he gradually moved towards rhetorical and political approaches. Discussing the hidden conservatism behind pure aesthetics, he says, "so much progressive and radical criticism in recent years has been concerned with the social implications of art, that affirmations of art's autonomy can often become, by antithesis, a roundabout way of identifying oneself with the interests of political conservatism" (28). In stark contrast to views of art's autonomy, novelist and literary critic John Fowles avows, "my first ambition has always been to alter the society I live in" and that social change is "the duty of all art" (Aubrey



31). While I don't want to inscribe a binary opposition labeling art as either political or nonpolitical, I believe Burke insightfully suggests the possibility of hidden politics behind insistence on the nonpolitical, be it in rhetoric, in writing instruction or in art: "In accordance with the rhetorical principle of identification, whenever you find a doctrine of 'nonpolitical' esthetics affirmed with fervor, look for its politics" (28).

The politics of English departments result, according to David Bartholomae, in devaluation of writing instruction because "critical scholarship" has become the primary criterion of status and value. The question is "who gets to use and practice criticism in the academy?" (335). He argues that "growth in English departments has been to divert money from tenure-stream faculty lines in order to provide increased funding for graduate study through the creation of a larger pool of teaching and research assistants" (334). Tenured faculty thus are "freed" from teaching writing to teach graduate seminars, while required writing courses become "[c]omposition as Reaganism"—programs in which writing is only taught instrumentally, as preparatory to students' vocations (335). Since Bartholomae has devoted much of his career to teaching and theorizing basic writing, he is committed to an alternative view of composition, one in which teachers "intervene in and direct the practice of individual writers" (336). He argues for a focus in the composition course, not on critical scholarship, but on what he calls "practical criticism," where the day-to-day work of the course is "revision" (336). He admits that this view "binds composition to the ordinary in ways that are professionally difficult. . . . And it ends with revisions that are small, local, and difficult to value" (336). Yet his vision is that practical criticism is linked to a significant larger critical project. He sees "the revision of the essay as an exercise in criticism (even, I think I would say, cultural criticism—that is, I would want students not only to question the force of the text but also the way the text positions them in relationship to a history of writing)" (336). Composition is criticism: "one that is local, one whose effects will be necessarily limited, but one, still, of significant consequence" (338).



The point is to see the student texts as a beginning, not as an end. If in their writing course students learn to think critically, they have the opportunity at the same time to critically revise their own writing.

A student in a recent advanced writing course, Geoff Wolfgramm, commented in his final self-reflective paper that he felt at the beginning of the course that “weekly writing assignments were a bit much.” But nonetheless he admitted that writing was precisely where “critical thinking started to develop.” A pre dentistry major, Geoff noticed that now he writes more than the “bare minimum,” not because of a grade, “but because there is so much more to say.” In his final research project on stem cells, he submitted his paper at the deadline, but wanted to continue writing: “I haven’t had that feeling before. I guess that is why they say that a paper is never finished.” Certainly, my pedagogy encourages rewriting/rethinking; this process tends to provoke greater depth of thought. Geoff confirmed this point with an unusual metaphor:

Throughout my education I have been taught things that basically touch the outermost layer of knowledge for every subject. . . . I relate this to a hungry monkey that peels a banana just to find out what’s inside, then not eat it. Not to blame my teachers, I’m sure that they were just covering the material necessary, but somewhere along the way (preferably at a much younger age), I wish that my teachers would have shown me what it’s like to taste the inside of the banana. In summation, I have learned during this class how I can eat every banana that I peel.

Geoff’s analogy could be interpreted in various ways, including the possibility that he might be telling the teacher what she wants to hear. But acknowledging that, I believe he suggests something about the subjective experience of pushing boundaries, of digging deeper, that critical writing and rewriting offers.



The text for the course, the aforementioned *Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy*, approaches argumentative writing “as a means of analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information acquired from sources in college courses and from . . . independent reading, listening to, and viewing of communication media” (89). The first item on the Rhetoric Checklist for students to employ when encountering a source and evaluating it is, “When you are expressing your views on a subject, ask yourself how extensive your knowledge of it is, what the sources of that knowledge are, and what restrictions there might be in your vantage point.” He further suggests that students ask the same questions of any text, or writer, they might encounter.

The first major assignment in the course is a rhetorical/critical analysis accompanied by a list of evaluation criteria. Geoff chose an article anthologized in the text, “The Case for Sweatshops,” to analyze the author’s use of *pathos* and *ethos*, and determined that the author makes a valid case. In this paper Geoff accomplished a vital first step in critical writing. As Lazere instructs: “Rhetorically, you need to show the reader that you are capable of approaching the opposing arguments evenhandedly and open-mindedly” (91). Geoff successfully demonstrated that he understood the article and moreover analyzed its rhetorical strengths. But I also suggested rewriting, asking him to reconsider the genre of the piece—paid public relations—and whether a critical reader might find some of the author’s techniques troubling. Geoff’s revised claim took a much more critical stance: “[The author] uses a variety of methods, including ethos, pathos, and selective vision as a means of propaganda to convince the reader that sweatshop factories in third-world countries are the best options that the poor citizens have.” He subsequently pointed out that the article “seemed like a long advertisement . . . funded by the owner of a sweatshop factory.” Geoff’s revised paper shows that that critical rhetoric in student writing often requires and is most successful as rewriting. The combined opportunity to rethink the original piece, through an interlocutor’s response, enables better outcomes.



Rewriting gets better outcomes—so what? This point may seem banal. Obviously effective writing teachers have long taught rewriting, but I have to ask if the process is usually theorized in terms of critical rhetoric. McKerrow's rhetor works from the realization that power is enacted through discourse. Through rewriting, Geoff realized that the article promulgated the ideology of the owner of the sweatshop factory. Further, the rewrite becomes an example of *doxa*—the focus turns to function (the article functioned as an advertisement), and inquiry into what is being left out (*pathos* and *ethos* are used—what about *logos*?). Just as analysis is a process of unpacking something, stripping away layers to get to the core, critical rhetoric reconsiders an original text and rewrites it to *create* greater depth. The original text may be subjective (relying on the perspective of one writing subject); but the revision may be intersubjective (incorporating additional perspectives). Rewriting thus promotes a rhetoric of inquiry and problematization. In my course, and for Bartholomae, "[t]he key point . . . is that a course in practical criticism must return students to their writing" (342).

Critical Discourse Analysis and WPA Outcomes

Rewriting is one application of critical rhetoric; undoubtedly numerous pedagogical enactments are possible.⁴ An additional one I focus on here is critical discourse analysis. CDA exemplifies a specific methodology which allows students to learn and begin to practice the principles of a critical rhetoric, thereby improving the rigor and effectiveness of their writing. This can be true at all levels of teaching and learning. Certainly for graduate students and emerging scholars, CDA presents a viable choice of research methodology to study and practice, but additionally, CDA provides writing teachers in training with options for their developing pedagogy. This becomes clear as we examine ways in which undergraduate students clearly benefit from both the methodology and goals of CDA, keeping in mind the important disclaimer that practice should be carefully gauged to course level and objectives. In both advanced writing and first-year composition courses, CDA adds specific practices to enable course



goals. To illustrate, it is helpful to examine the WPA Outcomes Statement for first-year composition which includes four categories of desired outcomes: Rhetorical Knowledge; Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing; Processes; and Knowledge of Conventions (WPA).

Under the heading Rhetorical Knowledge, at the end of first year composition, students should

- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
- Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
- Understand how genres shape reading and writing (WPA)

Under the heading "Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing," it is expected that students should:

- Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating
- Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources
- Integrate their own ideas with those of others
- Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power (WPA)

While the full Outcomes Statement lists additional outcomes, it is enlightening to compare these desired outcomes with the methodology prescribed by Thomas Huckin for CDA. These forms of analysis



- Address contemporary societal issues, seeking to show how people are manipulated by powerful interests through the medium of public discourse; . . .
- Give special attention to underlying factors of ideology, power, and resistance; . . .
- Combine rhetorical theory and social theory; . . .
- Take into account omissions, implicatures, presuppositions, ambiguities, and other covert but powerful aspects of discourse; . . .
- Ground their analyses in close, detailed inspection of texts;

Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse

Parallels with the Outcomes Statement are clear. As CDA specifies close, detailed inspection of texts, students learn to identify the rhetorical situations from which such texts emerge and to examine the formal conventions that respond to those situations. As CDA calls attention to omissions, implicatures, presuppositions, and ambiguities, students learn the conventions of genre and recognize when those conventions are ignored or deliberately thwarted. As CDA shows how people are manipulated by powerful interests through the medium of public discourse, students learn that reading and writing are a mode of inquiry into such problems. And, perhaps most significantly, as CDA gives special attention to ideology, power, and resistance, students can begin to understand relationships between language, knowledge and power.

Similar objectives structured the course I have described. In addition to the critical-rhetorical analysis, students wrote three major papers: an opinion editorial, an annotated bibliography, and a research paper. While the course focused on writing, students also studied the rhetorical skills that enable civic literacy via Lazere's text. In the first chapter, Lazere explains that the text



concentrates on rhetorical approaches to some of our most pressing current political and social controversies, in the length and depth necessary to develop coherent understanding of them, through studying them cumulatively and recursively, and *to follow and write extended lines of argument about them*. [emphasis mine]

To illustrate this process, I will look closely at one student's research, but I first want to explain how he chose his research topic. Primarily, students chose topics from their major fields of study. However, as an enrichment activity, I asked students to attend one session (of their choosing) of the Western States Rhetoric and Literacy Conference held on campus⁵ during the semester. Jon Wallin (English major) observed Professor Thomas Huckin's presentation about textual silences and became interested in pursuing textual silences as his research topic.

Jon drew upon Huckin's "Textual Silence and the Discourse of Homelessness," to provide a rationale for his own research. Huckin points out that "communication involves more than just the discourse markers used to encode it—that often what is *not* said or written can be as important, if not more so, than what *is*" (348). He defines a textual silence as "the omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand," and identifies "five broad categories" of silences: "*speech-act silences*," "*presuppositional silences*," "*discreet silences*," "*genre-based silences*," and "*manipulative silences*" (348). The article focuses on the category of manipulative silences, not only because their study has been neglected, but because of the implications such silences carry for public discourse that tends to be inaccurate, misleading and propagandistic. Textual manipulative silences "intentionally mislead or deceive the reader or listener in a way that is advantageous to the writer/speaker" (354). This deception is primarily accomplished through the device of framing, a contextualizing strategy that writers or speakers use by "mentioning certain relevant topics and subtopics and ignoring others" (354). Huckin employs Donati's definition of frame: "a general, standardized, predefined structure (in the sense that it



already belongs to the receiver's knowledge of the world) which allows re-cognition and guides perception" (qtd. in Huckin 354). Huckin goes on to conduct a case study, "drawing on a corpus of 163 newspaper articles and editorials" (1).

After studying Huckin's article, Jon wanted to both research the concept of textual silences and engage in (undergraduate level) discourse analysis. He appropriately limited the scope of his research to examining the websites of four U.S. Senate candidates in the 2006 election: Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah and his opponent, Pete Ashdown; Senator Rick Santorum, Pennsylvania, and his opponent, [the now] Senator Bob Casey, Pennsylvania. While Jon did not conduct empirical research similar to Huckin's case study with its extended corpus, he did model Huckin's analysis. Jon began his research by pointing out that

Campaign rhetoric gives politicians an opportunity to inform voters how they will represent their district while in office. It also tries to explain why that representation is in voters' best interests. When politicians fail to disclose their intentions, or hide their intentions behind textual vagueness, they are promising to misrepresent the interest of voters.

Jon focused on the information presented on the websites regarding U.S. foreign policy, particularly the war in Iraq.

He found that Orrin Hatch's website made brief and general statements about Iraq: "Some call for timetables for withdrawal from Iraq, despite the fact that cutting and running would only embolden the terrorists." Jon notes that

Hatch omits any discussion of what uses a timetable provide including the effect it would have on citizen approval of the war, assessable military progress towards a timetable goal, and increased understanding for Iraqi military regarding their role in Iraq security. He is assuming the reader doesn't consider such factors regarding a pullout timeline



important (as he clearly doesn't), or is manipulating the reader to believe such factors are unimportant. While it might be considered a presuppositional silence if Hatch considers all his readers to be of his same opinion, the very act of publishing a campaign-specific website assumes people of various viewpoints will read the information.

Jon's analysis of the purported textual silence is insightful. He acknowledges the possibility that what is left out of the discussion of a timetable goal could be considered either a presuppositional or a manipulative silence. However, considering the genre—campaign website—he concludes that Hatch's silence is "placed there to manipulate the reader in favor of a long-term occupation of Iraq. Such oversimplification abounds in Hatch's campaign discourse." Jon demonstrates here an understanding of "how genres shape reading and writing" (WPA), as well as a thoughtful reading of the text that "takes into account omissions" (Huckin, 2002, 156).

Jon parallels the Hatch example with one from Ashdown, Hatch's opponent, pointing out that "to avoid manipulative textual silences, a candidate need not be encyclopedic in covering each issue." Ashdown "does not resort to rhetorically loaded discourse, nor does he omit pertinent information":

The answer to Iraq is simple: let the Iraqis vote on how long they want to US to say, then do what they say. If they vote for us to leave, then the military has a mission: within sixty days, move to friendly countries such as Kuwait and Qatar to prevent Iranian invasion until the Iraqis can stop it on their own. If they say stay, then there is a mandate. Whether the result of this vote is a mission or a mandate, both should be executed with maximum transparency to the American people and the rest of the world.

Jon then compares Ashdown and Hatch's information: "Ashdown has drawn out a feasible plan of action which is much less ambiguous than



‘to end this war, we have to win it.’” It is clear that Hatch offers an opinion, not a plan. This omission “actually mandates inaction, which conceals what he intends to do in an issue that will surely see attention during upcoming congressional sessions.” In addition to the outcomes described above, Jon shows here that he is “finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources” (WPA).

Jon continues by comparing the websites of Santorum and Casey: “Senator Santorum wrote less than five lines regarding national security, his main argument relying on his unevidenced assertion that national security is his top priority.” Casey, in contrast, “wrote over two pages (70+ lines, more than ten times the amount Santorum wrote), detailing various aspects of national security including Defeating Terrorism, The Struggle in Iraq, Keeping Our Homeland Safe [etc.]” Again, Jon’s analysis shows an understanding of rhetorical situation: “It became apparent incumbents say less than their challengers.”

Studying Huckin’s argument about textual silences provided Jon with a method for his own analysis and research. Jon concludes, “Campaign discourse analysis not only helps one understand what isn’t written, but such a close reading also aids in comprehension of the written text as well. It would be effective to take this argument (textual silence) and apply it to candidate debates and other spoken campaign discourse.” Study of CDA, I believe, may help students conduct better research and write more rigorous and complex (complicating) assessments. Jon indicates that analysis and research has tremendously enhanced his civic literacy:

I cringe to think about my actions in previous elections, when I was younger and eager to just “get out and vote.” I wouldn’t even read the available information on candidates, but instead voted for incumbents. . . more recently, I have come to understand that a simple investigation of the campaigners’ discourse is not adequate. It is only through



an extensive rhetorical analysis that I am able to uncover where a politician places himself in the political spectrum.

Critical Rhetoric for the Writing Classroom and for Citizenry

Writing teachers each semester choose the kinds of approaches and assignments that structure their courses. Assignments such as the process paper that Mark wrote for his technical writing course set the stage for intriguing follow-up questions that would rewrite an initial simple paper and provide opportunity for critical thinking and writing, a more worthwhile assignment for university-level work. Critical rhetoric, revision, and discourse analysis are methodologies that require students to go beyond simplistic understandings. To conclude the “Traditional Principles of Rhetoric” section of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke argues that ideological mystifications “cannot be cleared away by a mere debunker’s reduction” (179). Mystification, by definition, is difficult to see through, and contains “ultimate reaches” of persuasion that speak to human psychological and social needs—thus, the “many reversions to ‘mystique’ in modern politics of right, center and left” (179). Mystified rhetoric is often present in even “trivial uses of persuasion” because language is involved (179). Language carries social and psychological power—identifications—that complicate even apparently simple communication. Burke says, if the *ultimate reaches* in the principle of persuasion are implicit in even the *trivial* uses of persuasion, people could not escape the ultimates of language merely by using language trivially (as with some mothers who seem to think that they can make their children “wholesome” merely by keeping them stupid). (179)

Burke’s implication is that education is necessary to understand the ultimate reaches of persuasion—writing teachers have the opportunity to help students learn to demystify rhetoric and write with awareness of the power that writers may wield. Student writing gradually may become critical rhetoric through revision, as rhetorical complexity rewrites initial simplistic reductions.



The stakes are high. Educated students are the essence of an educated citizenry that can penetrate political candidates' mystifications regarding important issues such as the Iraq War. An educated citizenry makes choices, votes, and at times challenges and remediates injustice. Burke asserts: "The choices between war and peace are ultimate choices. . . . And as the acts of persuasion add up in a social texture, they amount to one or the other of those routes—and they are radical, no matter however trivial the errors by which war is permitted to emerge out of peace" (179). Critical rhetoric is one way to lay bare the radical consequences of trivial error; student writing can participate in that important effort.

Endnotes

¹ For a recent conversation about whether writing can be taught as a set of transferable, neutral skills, see Joseph Harris's "Opinion: Revision as a Critical Practice" in *College English* (2003), and a response from David L. Wallace, "Transcending Normativity: Difference Issues in *College English*" (2006). Harris argues that students can learn to be critical of their own texts, following David Bartholomae, whose proposal for revision as a critical practice I advocate later in this article. Wallace acknowledges "the appeal of approaches like Harris's that try—as much as is possible—to limit the teaching of reading, writing, and rhetoric to a set of relatively neutral skills that are not embroiled in issues of identity" (526). Yet he must question whether neutrality is possible: "since I have been out as a teacher and scholar, this veneer of neutrality is no longer possible for me, and I suspect the same is true for many of my students and colleagues who identify (or have been identified) as members of traditionally disenfranchised groups within American culture" (526).

² McKerrow points out that "[c]onsiderations of rhetoric as epistemic are inextricably linked to a neo-Kantian definition of what constitutes



knowledge, as that will always be seen in terms of independent, universal standards of judgment (whether invoked by Perelman, Toulmin, or Habermas). . . . A more positive approach is to reassert the value of rhetoric's province—*doxa*—and thereby resituate theory and practice in a context far more amenable to its continuance" (104).

³ In *The Politics of Writing*, Romy Clark and Roz Ivani survey the multidisciplinary discussion about writing as a political act. They draw upon Antonio Gramsci to show how press and media are powerful persuasive instruments for establishing and maintaining hegemony. Media tends to "favour the hegemony of the dominant class" (33), with the consequence that "[o]rdinary people have little access to alternative views of the world and ways of representing it" (35). Clark and Ivani therefore propose writing informed by a "radical politics" to challenge dominant practices (19, 218). Just as teachers experience a double bind as they in some sense always reinforce hegemony, learners "have a love-hate relationship with writing, sensing its necessity for access to life-chances, but often feeling alienated from its forms and purposes" (230). Writing pedagogy can lay bare the double bind that writing presents for both teachers and students, and thereby stimulate rhetorical interventions into social realities.

⁴For a current discussion of options for critical teaching, see "'Anti-American Studies' in the Deep South: Dissenting Rhetorics, the Practice of Democracy, and Academic Freedom in Wartime Universities." Karen M. Powers and Catherine Chaput make a compelling case for critical student writing that intervenes in both "public rhetoric and global politics" (675). They show how officially supported propaganda creates a "political unconscious" that links war policies and patriotism (651). Pedagogies that do not reinforce nationalist political ideologies, and instead critically interrogate such discourses, are judged anti-American. Powers and Chaput argue that critical teaching enables students to rhetorically intervene in the political unconscious. They cite another example: the founding of



Rhetoricians for Peace at the 2003 Conference of College Composition and Communication, and the resultant 1984 + 20 writing initiative sponsored by RFP and the National Council of English Teachers. The 1984 + 20 project exemplifies how composition courses can promote critical student writing that tackles public issues.

⁵ The 2006 Western States Rhetoric and Literacy Conference took place at the University of Utah where I taught writing during my doctoral studies.

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