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A Response to Back to the Future?

Dale Cyphert

University of Northern Iowa, dale.cyphert@uni.edu

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A Response to Back to the Future?

Dale Cyphert

As a rhetoric scholar, I obviously applaud David Grant's claim that effective writing instruction necessarily involves rhetorical education. I could even pile on with corroborating evidence from contemporary pedagogy in speech making, discussion, and interpersonal communication. There is no argument, at least among those who study the subject. Communication is effective and appropriate only to the extent that it conforms to the rhetorical norms of both rhetor and audience—the social, epistemological and performative rules for collective decision making on which they can agree. Thus, communication instruction, including writing instruction, is most effective as coached skill development within a context of rhetorical socialization. The challenge that Dr. Grant identifies is not one of evidence or theoretical understanding.

Grant also offers an explanation for the decline of rhetorical education as the centerpiece of a university education, focusing on the distinction between liberal arts and general education. He acknowledges the historical and pragmatic reasons for the shift, but the call to go "back to the future" opens up practical and theoretical issues that will need to be resolved before we can move—forward or backward. One might ask why any university might resist Dr. Grant's call? Why would a faculty choose to focus on the disciplining of student grammar at the expense of a broad rhetorical education? What could be so difficult about returning to our academic roots?

This is not an idle question from my position in the College of Business Administration. Charged with the development of communication skills of business majors, my experience echoes Grant's introductory description. Employers (and business faculty) consistently complain that students lack writing ability, and the College consistently responds with greater rigor in the assessment of student grammar. If better writing instruction is a predictable consequence of a rhetorically oriented curriculum, what stands in the way? Why don't we abandon our apparent neurosis if writing is not improved by a focus on formal correctness?

Grant's essay suggests a causal relationship with the expansion of general education and increased emphasis on professional preparation, which might implicate the business college's pre-professional mission as somehow complicit in the abandonment of the liberal arts. While I can't speak for business colleges more generally, our situation at *UNIBusiness* would seem to complicate an easy conclusion. First, our status as an AACSB accredited program has required that our graduates take a majority of their coursework outside the college in a deliberate attempt to insure a broad, liberal arts education. Some students complain that the required courses are irrelevant to their job preparation, but our faculty is well aware of the advantages of a liberal arts education over a narrow technical focus. Second, anecdotal evidence, at least, is that on some



measures, *UNIBusiness* students' writing ability exceeds University norms. This is undoubtedly influenced by the solid ACT scores of students entering the program, but belies a concern that a pre-professional course of study somehow exacerbates poor writing.

Nevertheless, the College's learning assessment committee named the identification of "those students most in need of help" as a major priority this year, along with new processes to aid in their improvement. This is not to say that another round of rigor is unwarranted. No matter how good the current writing instruction, or how rhetorically competent our students might be, a commitment to those who need the most help is a laudable sentiment. The prospect of identifying the College's worst writers raises a few issues, however, that seem to suggest that meeting Dr. Grant's call for rhetorical education could be a most difficult task.

Just who are the students who most need better writing instruction? Are they the "back row boys" whose political savvy and rhetorical sensitivity is masked by garbled syntax and hopeless punctuation? Or, the "grinders" who demand multiple rounds of feedback but refuse to edit beyond the mechanical errors marked? Perhaps we should target the naïve souls who compose every document to an ideal audience of illiterate teenagers? But maybe we ought to be most concerned with the frustrated "A students" whose fluent academese is judged wordy, rambling, and inappropriate as business communication. Or, with the perfectly competent writers who submit their sloppy, incoherent, 2:00am work because they recognize no rhetorical exigency that demands otherwise.

We could define "worst" in terms of the most difficult issues to overcome—my vote is for the perseverating proofreaders who seem to lack any shred of rhetorical sensitivity. The easy way out would dispense with rhetoric completely: administer standardized grammar tests with a suitable incentive for students who perform well on the post-test. Surely there is some happy middle ground between targeting the arguably hopeless and abandoning the rhetorical project completely. Is there some guidance here in a "return to the future"? What would Quintilian do?

Dr. Grant points us in the right direction when he stresses the importance of contextualized writing instruction that introduces students to the rhetorical norms of a discourse community. Rhetorical education involves socializing a student, causing conformity to the social, epistemological, and performative norms of his or her community. Quintilian might add a heavy dose of imitation, requiring that students appreciate and mimic eloquence until they have internalized the stylistic characteristics of effective and appropriate rhetoric.

But wait! What has happened to creativity and critical thinking? What about cross-cultural communication competence? Who's to say what counts as eloquence in a technologically enhanced global business environment? If we are successful in teaching



our students to meet the rhetorical exigencies in predictably effective ways, who will be left to critique the rhetorical norms that we have so effectively instilled in them? A post-modern sensibility, even among those who resist that philosophical position, has raised the bar. A return to the classical disciplines of rhetorical education is not the entire answer.

Our twenty-first century students must be competent in multiple rhetorical communities, crossing mindfully from academic or scientific to business or legal discourse. They must be cognizant of the contradictory norms of diverse communities, recognizing the ethical and rational bases for others' behavior. They must facilitate communication across a global network of competing, contradictory rhetorical communities. By these standards, the worst writers are those who slavishly conform to the norms of contemporary business practice but cannot conceive of anything else to be moral, rational or decent discourse. The normative socialization of liberal arts education was the strength of Western civilization, and Dr. Grant is correct that the source of that strength was a contextualized, integrated attention to rhetorical norms. The challenge is not, however, to return to an idealized past, but to devise a pedagogy for a far more difficult future.