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Teaching Rhetorical Segmentation as a Countermeasure to Post-Truth in the Composition Classroom

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Abstract

This paper responds to the call for rhetoric and composition instructors to engage with post-truth and fake news in the composition classroom. Pulling from personal experiences with post-truth in the composition classroom, the author leverages recent scholarship to develop a multi-phasic, objective analytical approach – rhetorical segmentation – that students can use to identify the purposes and motivations of a particular text. The approach of rhetorical segmentation relies on three primary steps: measuring rhetorical velocity, evaluating ideological modality, and identifying public harm. By combining these steps in a coherent method of analysis, the author argues that students are better equipped to understand how information has traveled, to where, and why. This ultimately enhances student recognition that every text has an underlying motivation and purpose that can change at each node of re-composition.

Keywords

rhetorical velocity, ideological modality, public good, composition, argumentation, post-truth, fake news, teaching

In *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition,* McComiskey (2017) argued that the *WPA Outcomes Statement* issued by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2014) offers a framework for tackling post-truth and fake news. He observed, "If students acquire the conceptual knowledge and practical skills described in the *Outcomes Statement*, the very foundations of post-truth rhetoric will begin to crumble" (p. 40). The *Outcomes Statement* put forth four categories to be taught in higher education writing classrooms: rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking and reading skills, the composition process across contexts, and a knowledge of writing conventions. These represent what I routinely have taught in my first-year composition and upper-division argumentation courses across two different Research-1 universities since 2014. However, unlike McComiskey, I do not believe that the application of such categories, alone, are enough to crumble the foundations of post-truth rhetoric. Indeed, I have grown troubled by my observation that frameworks such as this – which have long informed the teaching of writing – are no longer working in the ways they should.

In Spring 2018, I taught a class on Argumentative Writing. This was a nuts-and-bolts course that sought to offer a cross-disciplinary group of students exposure to classical rhetorical devices, grounding in inductive and deductive reasoning, and practice in composing persuasive pieces of writing. The reading and discussion component of the class centered on contemporary issues and, over the semester, we grappled with competing narratives surrounding immigrant family separation, the immigration ban, the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation hearings, and the Jamal Khashoggi killing, among others. It was a real-time, day-to-day excursion into the arguments that were being circulated in our national civic discourse. As the semester wore on, while I tried to center learning on my class' intended outcomes – which very nicely aligned with the 2014 *WPA Outcomes Statement* invoked by McComiskey – I noticed that my students were growing increasingly bothered. They began asking, almost daily, variants of a question: "How can we know that is true?" I initially thought this was a good development as they were asking precisely the question they ought to be asking in the era of fake news. Except, there was a problem. The question was asked not to inquire, I eventually realized, but to demonstrate skepticism that the truth in any of these scenarios was knowable. The perspective under examination did not matter, the issue did not matter, the political ideology at play did not matter – they were indicating a collectively shared belief that they could not know what was true beyond themselves.

In response, I opted to give students a series of arguments that offered up claims such as: truth does not exist, even if truth does exist there is no way of knowing what it is, and language matters only insofar as it can be used to manipulate. I thought this might spur some discussion about the elephant in the room, but was instead met with silence. I asked, "Does anyone want to rebut these claims?" Silence. Then, after some thought, one student raised her hand and said, "the only truth that matters is what I choose to believe in the given moment. My truth is the truth." To be sure, ways of perceiving and self-truths are powerful things, and I wanted to acknowledge her philosophical bent, so pushed a bit: "If *you* choose to believe *we* are not in the classroom, are we or are we not?" Her retort: "*We're* not."

This left me unsettled. There is, after all, a difference between one's beliefs – which are chosen truths – and the external realities in which we function. There will be concrete consequences if I leap from tall building, no matter what I believe to be true. In an historical moment where Rudy Giuliani can get on national television and declare "truth isn't truth" (Phillips, 2018) and not get laughed off the screen, we seem to be missing the most dangerous point of all: those of us with responsibility for addressing post-truth have failed to create any new, let alone effective, countermeasures to address the onslaught of mis-information and dis-information in the context of the higher education classroom. The models remain, more or less, variations on those we have been using for years. Information and digital literacies are not enough. Metaliteracy is not enough. Grounding students in the rhetorical tradition is not enough. We need something *more*. This represents a crisis not only for those in rhetoric and composition, but the entire institution of higher education.

McComiskey (2017) noted that the post-truth moment represents the disappearance of facts, realities, and truths "from the epistemological continuum" (p. 8). Without these, he argued, their opposites also disappear. While I do not agree with his solution – which more or less amounts to doubling down on what we have been doing – I do agree with his diagnosis: truths and lies, facts and fallacies, reality and doublespeak have all disappeared from the continuum. That is exactly what I have observed in my classes, and what we daily observe playing out in national discourse. In the writing classroom, the use of the "currency, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose" (CRAAP) criteria no longer works, for example, because with the disappearance of *both sides* of the epistemological continuum, any claim relating to any element of CRAAP is met with *The Big Lebowski's* dude: "Well, that's...like...just your opinion, man" (Bevan & Coen, 1998). Tallis (2016) argued that such cynicism necessarily arises out of the destabilization of truth, thereby creating a situation that is not obviously remediable through rhetorical training (p. 8). Indeed, Sundvall and Fredlund (2017) cautioned that, "perhaps what we should fear the most, as teachers and scholars of rhetoric, is the arrestment of rhetorical possibility – the end of rhetoric" (para. 47).

While such fear resonates in this particular historical moment, I offer one possible solution to help expand information and digital literacy education and support the reflective/reflexive project of meta-literacy. In the following, I advocate for teaching students a multi-phasic approach that I refer to as *rhetorical segmentation*, which strategically – and objectively – segments a given piece of information in three steps: measure its velocity, evaluate its ideological modality, and identify real or imagined public harms.

Measuring Velocity

Manovich (2002) observed that our way of understanding information flow has changed from the traditional 20th century model: "now the reception point is just a temporary station on information's path […] Information arrives, gets remixed with other information, and then the new package travels to other destination where the process is repeated" (p. 1). To respond to this reality, Ridolfo and DeVoss (2009) developed the concept of rhetorical velocity to examine "how a text might be re-composed" and "how composers strategically design texts for reappropriation by third parties” (para. 2). Ridolfo and DeVoss’ primary interest in rhetorical velocity was from the perspective of the composer, as a way to enhance invention for greater, quicker impact “across physical and virtual networks and spaces” (para. 2). As they developed it, the invention process considers three key moments: composition, instances of delivery, and future possibilities. Importantly, their concept can also be used as an analytical tool.

The measurement of rhetorical velocity is not dependent on whether or not a given individual is the composer of a piece of information. Instead, to measure velocity, one needs to first identify the piece of information under consideration: is this the original piece or an appropriated/re-composed piece? Then, where and how has it been delivered? Or, to what uses has it already been put? How fast has it been distributed to different nodes? In other words, teaching rhetorical velocity as the first step of rhetorical segmentation guides students to (1) identify a piece of information as original or appropriated, (2) locate the means and sites of delivery and transmission (social media, email, website, etc.), and (3) gauge the speed at which it has been disseminated (virality).

Notably, these steps do not operate in the same way that the traditional CRAAP formula works. Identifying a text as original or appropriated for re-composition does not determine, for example, whether it is credible or not. Instead, it asks *where* this piece of information is at in its lifecycle. If it is a freshly issued press release directly from the organization that authored it, that reveals certain realities about the information (e.g., it is an initial composition and use, the topic is of importance to the organization, and that the organization intends for the information to be engaged with). If it is a tweet critiquing the press release, that, too, is revelatory (e.g., it is a re-composition, the topic is of importance to the re-composer, and the re-composer has engaged negatively with the original composition). Going through this process of analysis carefully and methodically with a given piece of information tunes students in to possible intended uses as well as to possible unintended uses. Whether it is original or appropriated also draws a line of connection to authorship, again not to assess credibility, but to understand the compositional context.

Next, identifying the means and sites of delivery and transmission also avoids the question of credibility; instead, the goal of this move is to identify the various pathways a piece of information has traveled and the authorial intentionality (positive, neutral, or negative) of re-composers. This is less about a specific moment in the lifecycle and more about the lifecycle’s history; this moment of analysis is focused on locating the various places of re-composition that happen for a given piece of information. Where has it traveled to and how did it get there? If the press release goes out, what are the nodes of re-composition? Each new landing spot is a new launching pad. Identifying these helps students to see how information moves and the variety of ways that information can get re-composed and sent in a variety of different directions from the original.

Finally, by asking how fast a piece of information has traveled, we begin to consider the level of impact – faster travel might indicate, for instance, more nodes of re-composition and, thereby, greater social impact. Notice that this move does not ask students to assess the quality of impact (i.e., good or bad), but just to determine whether there has been an impact and, if so, how much of one. Impact gets us to consider the information's perceived significance.

The steps of measuring rhetorical velocity are relatively simple and straightforward. They can be taught. By avoiding credibility assessments and focusing instead on lifecycle, transmission, and speed, student biases are less likely to come into the picture and they are also given a toolkit to objectively engage with a text. But measuring rhetorical velocity is only the first step. We then have to teach the next step: evaluating ideological modality.

Evaluating Ideological Modality

The second step of rhetorically segmenting a piece of information involves the evaluation of its ideological modality. At the stage of evaluating ideological modality, instructors should make an admission to their students – that post-truth and fake news exist across the entirety of the political spectrum. There is an assumption that post-truth rhetorics only reside on one side (the other side) of the ideological spectrum, but there exists plenty of evidence to indicate otherwise. The danger here is that ideological coherence in group contexts (i.e., what some have called ideological tribalism) leads to the assumption that because members of a group agree with one another, member's sources and arguments are neither bullshit nor fake news. That is dangerous because ideological coherence tends to discourage critical thinking: groupthink results. We know that ideological cohesion tends to result in rhetorical slippage, "the ways in which terms and concepts slip into more simplistic forms that fail to account for important nuance and detail" (Gagnon, 2017, p. 7) that "create fictional spaces of discourse" (De Certeau, 2011, p. 24). People who tend to agree on ideology or political goals are less willing to critically inspect the sources or ideas being put forward by one another. That is where we have to be careful, and where we have to encourage – teach – our students to be careful. We would do well to remember that fake news is not only a Trumpian thing, but rather something that defines public discourse as a whole in this particular historical moment.

Second, we must encourage students to conduct an objective assessment: we are not teaching them to ask whether this information is good or bad, or even if they agree with its content or purpose, but rather to identify where it resides ideologically at a particular node in its re-composition lifecycle. By having measured rhetorical velocity as the precursor to this step, the students will have a firmer idea of the pathways this particular piece of information has traveled. Knowing the history of travel is important to ascertaining ideological modality. The question of ideological modality is not simply about identifying whether a piece of information is, say, left-of-center or right-of-center but about detecting the way in which it is both being experienced and expressed at a particular stopping point. We should teach our students to look at a piece of information and see the elements of the rhetorical situation. So, if the information is re-composed to convey a particular ideology, we have to ask: what is that ideology? Who is expressing it? And then, how is this re-composition, at this particular node and moment, being experienced and by whom? Evaluating ideological modality is about understanding the way a piece of information is simultaneously disseminated, experienced, and consumed. This clues us in to whether the piece is representative of ideological coherence or if there are experiential divergences. If there is coherence, we might want to explore and account for ideological tribalism; if there are divergences, then we might want to explore and account for the ways in which those divergences re-compose the information in different ways.

Additionally, we must teach our students to ask: what does this piece's ideological modality at a particular moment and node tell us about its possible uses? The question of experience and cohesion precedes this final question because it often can shed light on the possibilities of use: to what end has it been put, where might it go next, and what might that next re-composition be designed to do?

Identifying Harms

Sundvall and Fredlund (2017) observed that "the goal of education, especially education within the humanities, is not to produce productive members of a late capitalist logic or society but rather to produce effective citizens. Such citizens need a rhetorical education so they can both analyze the rhetoric intended to persuade them and so they can participate in society" (para. 4). Such a rhetorical education cannot be effective or useful without a renewed emphasis on the teaching of ethics and the public good in the composition classroom. As Sundvall and Fredlund note:

> the art of persuasion denotes both a belief (*doxa*) and the persuasive application of that belief (*praxis*), engendering the world as we know it (*aletheia*). The *rhetorical process* thus always involves determinations of value (ethics), power (politics), and common ideas (ideology). We can trace this condition of rhetoric back to its origins, when the Sophists' skepticism regarding truth (*episteme*/*logos*) was nonetheless supplemented by a focus on virtue (*arête*). (para. 5)

Our students may be skeptical of truth or the knowability of truth, but I have yet to find a student who does not appreciate the concept of virtue. In this moment, it seems that we are returning – maybe even must return – to a Sophistic approach to rhetorical thinking and training. In the post-truth era we must center our training on how to identify the virtuous, the ethical. So, instead of centering rhetorical segmentation on determining truth – a determination that the segmentation process avoids – the approach instead encourages the identification of outcomes. Identifying outcomes leads students to consider good and ill effects, or the tangible things that can and do happen when a piece of information is operationalized.

To this end, the third step of rhetorical segmentation – identifying harms to the public good – encourages students to ask a series of identifying questions while taking into account their developed knowledge about a piece of information's rhetorical velocity and ideological modality: (1) Can or does this information harm anyone? If, say, a press release describes immigrants as rapists and murderers, is there any harm caused to immigrants who do not fall into those categories? (2) What type of harm can be or is caused by this information? In other words, does the information have the potential to do particular things, or cause actions? If the harm is real, or potentially real, how do we describe the types of harm? Finally, (3) what are the impacts and implications of this real or potential harm? What results stem from the harm we can identify in this piece of information?

Of these three questions, only the last one – identifying impacts and implications – seeks to move beyond mere identification towards a place of valuation and, as such, into the realm of ethics. By asking these three questions at the end of a multi-phasic, objective analysis of rhetorical velocity and ideological modality, students are well positioned to then transition, for themselves, into the subsequent lines of questioning that inevitably occur: Is this harm acceptable on its own? Is this harm acceptable in light of the implications? What am I going to do about this or with this new understanding about this piece of information?

Conclusion

At the end of the day, I am not convinced that we can teach our students that anything is true – or even that truth is knowable. I will leave that pressing question to those smarter than I. But I am convinced that we can give students the tools to objectively interact with texts, real and fake, in a non-biased way so that they can understand where that particular information came from, how it is being used, how it can be used, and where it might go. By focusing students on this type of assessment, rather than solely on questions of truth or credibility, they can move towards something they understand: information acts in the world and that information has tangible results that we can and do evaluate as being good or bad, whether or not it is true.

We are at an odd moment in history, and in the teaching of writing. Fake news comes at us from every direction and we are in a position where scholars of rhetoric and composition wonder whether we are on the precipice of the end of rhetoric. I acknowledge those fears, and share them. At the same time, our students are accessing texts across digital interfaces (websites, social media, games, apps, videos, podcasts, and so on) and face technologically driven challenges of interpretation and analysis, all while inhabiting a landscape defined by skepticism as to the knowability of truth. This proposal is some small offering of hope that there might be – nay, there are – ways of teaching in the post-truth moment that can effectively train students to be rhetorically minded participants in civic society.

The process of rhetorical segmentation – analyzing a text from the perspectives of rhetorical velocity, ideological modality, and public harm – offers students a set of tools to segment information to get an objective sense of how that information has traveled, where, and why. This segmentation purposefully does not push students to assess credibility or truth per se, instead reorienting the paradigm to one centered in the sophistic notion of virtue. Even so, in segmenting a text in this particular way, students gain a substantial amount of objective knowledge about the text that will lead them to a sort of truth about the nature, purpose, and uses and misappropriations of the text. If we can get students to see how information gets operationalized, then they will be better attuned to understanding that every text has an underlying motivation and purpose that can change at each node of re-composition.

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Appendix A

Teaching Rhetorical Segmentation in the Classroom: An Exercise

Present students with a composed or re-composed "text" – it could be a press release, a tweet, a posting on Instagram. Explain to students that the class will collaboratively analyze the information in an objective way through a process of rhetorical segmentation to determine how the information operates in the world.

- **Step 1:** Guide students through each requirement to measure the rhetorical velocity of the chosen text. Remember, the primary focus in this step is objective identification, not valuation. Questions for discussion at this point could include: Is the text original or appropriated? What are the means and sites of delivery and transmission? What is the rapidity at which this text has traveled? Students can be placed into small groups to discuss each requirement and then come back as a class and discuss. It is useful to put key findings for each question on the board for everyone to view.

- **Step 2:** Next, transition the conversation to ideological modality. Again, make clear that this is an objective identification (i.e., what it is, not whether or not it is "good"). Students can return to their small groups to discuss this part of segmentation. Questions for discussion at this point could include: What is the ideology expressed in the text? Who is expressing it? How is this, at this particular node and moment, being experienced and by whom? Again, put key findings to each question on the board for everyone to view.

- **Step 3:** Repeat the process for the identification of real and potential harms. Have students ask and respond to the following questions: Can or does this information harm anyone? What type of harm can be or is caused by this information? What are the impacts and implications of this real or potential harm? What results stem from the harm identified in this piece of information?

Once all three components have been addressed, direct a shift in the conversation to inquire what students see about this particular text that they did not see before the segmentation analysis. The central question to be asked at this point is: What will you or can you do with this new understanding about this piece of information? The conversation can move in any of a number of different directions, but can be generative to think about mapping information flow in relation to motivations, the relationship of power to politics and ethics, and the value and importance of this type of analysis to ferret out information designed to do harmful things. Following the discussion, students can be formally assigned a project that asks them to replicate the rhetorical segmentation exercise for themselves with a different text that is of interest to them personally.