

# Pedagogy Statement...

## Rhetoric, Composition, and Literature

*In the Western conversation about human expression, spoken or written, the great villain has always been self-consciousness. As soon as our audience thinks we are considering how we are speaking, paying attention to style instead of substance, they start feeling their pockets to make sure their wallets are safe.*

—Richard A. Lanham, from The Economics of Attention

*Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.*

—Oscar Wilde

Despite Lanham's quote above, as a college instructor I often feel it is my duty to strive to be self-conscious when I teach, when I speak to students, and when I advise or model rhetorical discourse. My thoughts, my writing process, my struggle to always think critically, my academic achievements, and even some failures must stand, first and foremost, as an example to my students of those things they should do – and occasionally as those things they should not. As teachers, we ask our students to seek truth – to look into themselves, to find their inner muse or hidden philosopher – all knowledge that helps them hone reading and writing skills – yet so few instructors are willing to show the students how they themselves began the process; fewer still are willing to share with a class how writing (thinking!) changed their own lives. Indeed, it is a tenuous position for any teacher to find herself, but even as I walk a fine line between that which I share with students and those things I will always keep private, my pedagogy begins with honesty. I believe that this level of self-consciousness not only makes me a more accessible instructor, but it makes me a better teacher, a better writer, a better reader, a better thinker, and I believe that, in the end, it may go a long way towards making me a better citizen of our complex and ever-changing world. Perhaps it sounds a bit corny to someone who does not carry the burden of “teacher,” or even to my more cynical colleagues, but though my pedagogy has certainly become more defined and specific over the years, one ideal has remained consistent in my teaching philosophy: I will grow if my students grow.

In his 2006 book, The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information, Richard A. Lanham argues that the American economy is no longer a study of “scarce resources,” as information and ideas is no longer the scarce commodity of even thirty years ago. Lanham argues that the new scarce resource is attention. My beloved rhetoric, Lanham suggests, “might as well have been called ‘the economics of attention’” (xii) for it “tells us how to allocate our central scarce resource, to invite people to attend to what we would like them to attend to” (xii-xiii). In fact, what Lanham ultimately alleges is that in a attention deprived “economy” like the one we find ourselves living with today, the study of rhetoric, and of learning in general, will demand that students and scholars see in two ways at once: as reader and as writer. Lanham describes this process as “looking at” and “looking through.” To look *through* a text is to take its message for what it claims itself to be; to look *through* “text” – that is, a journal article, a picture, a billboard, an email, a résumé, a newspaper story, an advertisement, or even a person is to be persuaded (or not) to believe the provided details, facts, perspective, or opinions, or even to purchase a product or service. Conversely, when we look *at* a text we see the construction behind the words: we are aware that the creator, the writer, aimed to get and keep our attention. To look at a

work is to begin the process of rhetorical thinking and analysis - to see how a writer does what he or she does to win and keep a reader's favor.

Though on the surface, much of what Lanham writes does not suggest that self-consciousness is a *positive* model (as I suggest), he actually, I think, begins a discussion here that works nicely in conjunction with my own theories on the same. Yes, I DO believe that the rhetorical swing between looking *at* and looking *through* at "text" requires a self-consciousness that is, as Lanham writes, considered suspect by most readers. Nevertheless, in an economy where our students' attention is a scarce resource, self-consciousness about where to allot or direct our valuable time and attention (as well as the consideration of how we, as teachers, might attract and keep the attention of our attention-disadvantaged students) is paramount.

In my undergraduate composition, rhetoric, and literature courses, I ask students to read any "text" I assign self-consciously. No matter how different each of these courses may be, each course will share a rhetorical stance: self-conscious "reading" of the work (that which they will read and that which they will write). For example, in my freshman composition courses, I often teach the writing around a theme. In the fall of 2006, I introduced the theme "The Rhetoric of America." This gave them a chance to analyze the classic texts of America (many that are rhetorical masterpieces and most all that were unknown to the students) and an opportunity to look *at* and look *through* their own writing - using the common lens of "America." It was a theme that allowed a certain freedom of choice: I asked students to think of that which makes us (or anyone) "American" and that which becomes "non-American." It was a theme that brought such rhetorical topics as fear, economics, education, religion, morals, and even hate and love to the forefront of our critical in-class discussions. Ultimately, I required students to create personal journals, respond to both inflammatory and inspiring texts, and use their burgeoning rhetorical vocabulary to create a rhetorical analysis of these texts - independently from class discussions. Rather than asking students to merely think about their own writing process, a strategy that has become increasingly over-done (in my opinion) in composition pedagogy, I asked students to consider the rhetorical techniques of another's text, and I asked them to do this by creating a well-thought-out argument which would force them into a new awareness (as a side-note) of their own rhetorical choices - as writer *and* reader.

It is my belief that once students are able to recognize and subsequently analyze rhetorical tropes in unfamiliar texts, they will become increasingly self-conscious as writers, readers, and rhetoricians. It is my hope that this self-consciousness will lead to and result in skepticism about the world in which they must live, learn, and work. I want them to question the motives behind any writer's choices - to become careful keepers of their own "economy of attention."

As a rhetorician, I cannot teach, read, or write without always considering my (or another's) audience, purpose and occasion. Teaching the significance of these three rhetorical issues is a priority in all my courses. I want students to answer understand what these positions might be for any text they read, but more importantly, I want them to know how these ideas will play into their own rhetorical stance as they write and as they read. It is common for me to share my own writing projects (in various stages of completion and success) in class. I want them to see these academic conventions at work in the "real world." They do not use their education in a vacuum, and as a result, I do not teach in one. Life issues will always have a penultimate position in any of my courses - whether these are introductory writing courses or specific courses in genre or literature.

As a teacher, I am self-conscious. I want my students to know our time together resonates long after the class ends. So, I share my personal life, my opinions, and my writing throughout the semester. I want them to know that *they* have had a significant and lasting effect on *me*, that the ideas, stories, and dreams they share in class and with me are always valuable, and that they, in turn, are valuable as well. College, for too many students, becomes the painful means to a specific end and not the dialogic experience it should be if we are to prepare these same students for a world outside of academia. Though being dialogic is always a work-in-progress, I am constantly reminded that my students are not a “consequence” of my *teaching* life; they are my part of my whole life, and our time together is not about the simple ideals of teaching or learning – it is about discovering that, which as Wilde writes, is “worth knowing.”

---