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Introduction: Crossing the Threshold

Argumentative writing is writing that reasons its way to a conclusion. It addresses ideas that the writer takes seriously enough to want to explore and support with good reasons.

—JOHN T. GAGE

For my birthday this year, I finally got something I've wanted for most of my adult life: a real camera. On the advice of a friend who's an amateur photographer, I asked my husband to get me a Canon EOS Rebel T3 as a good starter camera for someone who wants to learn how to do more than point and shoot. That was six months ago. So far, I've read the manual a few times, watched tutorial videos, and taken loads of pictures, but I still just point and shoot.

As I was taking pictures at my niece's birthday party with no more skill than I'd used with my cell phone camera, it occurred to me that I might be bumping up against what researchers call a "threshold concept" in learning. All learning involves some kind of movement from surface to depth; that's just the normal developmental trajectory, the struggle toward mastery we experience in our "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky 1978, 84). But sometimes that trajectory hits an obstacle that's hard to get past, even with support. When the struggle for a deeper understanding involves more than garden-variety confusion, chances are you're on the doorstep of a threshold concept.

In "Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge," Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land describe a threshold concept "as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" (2003, 1). Once learned, threshold concepts are difficult to unlearn because they transform the way we think about our subject matter—and

sometimes our world. For instance, Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection is a threshold concept that changes how we view the life sciences. Or, to give a nonexample, a concept like “storytelling” in English language arts is not a threshold concept because most students have an intuitive grasp of this idea. Personal narrative comes naturally to students. In contrast, threshold concepts mark both a major stumbling block and point of no return in learning since successfully passing through the portal depends on learning to think differently, even counterintuitively.

Curious to know if I might be headed for new territory in picture-taking, I did a quick Internet search on “threshold concepts” and “photography.” Hits came from around the globe identifying “visualization” as a threshold concept that forever changes the way we use cameras. I thought photography was just about recognizing and capturing beauty. I didn’t realize that I could be visualizing the work of art I wanted to create before determining the conditions to create it. Training myself to see the finished image instead of what’s before my eyes? That’s transformative learning indeed. I find I can hold this new idea in my head just so long before I slip back to my old dependence on my viewfinder. This is the oscillation between superficial and deep learning Meyers and Land (2003) describe as endemic to the process of threshold crossing.

Threshold Concepts in Argumentation

I think this transitional place is where most of our high school students are when it comes to argumentation. They certainly have plenty of practical experience with arguing and responding to arguments. And whether the term is new to them or not, our students know a lot about rhetoric. They have experience trying to persuade different audiences for different purposes, adjusting their persona to suit different occasions, and using logic and emotion to get what they want. Think of the many times students have tried to talk you into giving them a higher grade. What teenagers typically don’t have a lot of experience with is how to do more than the basics. Like me with my camera, our students are in possession of tools they haven’t mastered yet because they don’t have a deep sense of their transformative capacities.

We can work with that.

If we want our students to do more than just point and shoot when it comes to argumentation, we need to teach them what rhetoric is and does. Rhetorical reading and writing are the gateway practices behind effective argumentation. Within rhetoric itself, we find several threshold concepts that change how students approach texts: occasion, audience, purpose, ethos, pathos, and logos. All are integrative and transformative.

This book is about opening doors to deeper learning for all our students through a rhetorical approach to arguments—an approach based on situational awareness and responsiveness instead of rules and formulas. Throughout the chapters, you’ll find detailed examples of activities, such as the rhetorical précis, descriptive outlining, and the doubting and believing game, that show students how to move beyond a superficial response to texts. Many students who

aspire to higher education are not in Advanced Placement classes—and many more students with the ability to succeed in college and career don’t initially see their own potential. They (and sometimes their teachers) might think they’re just not “college material.” Rhetorical knowledge helps all of us see more than what’s before our eyes.

Why Rhetoric Matters

Rhetoric—in addition to being versatile—has always been both eminently rigorous and practical. Throughout the centuries, rhetoric has been a remarkably adaptive means to prepare critical thinkers and effective communicators for real-world decisions. Rhetoric develops what literacy researchers Richard Beach, Amanda Haertling Thein, and Daryl Parks identify as an equalizing competency for working-class teens: the ability to “negotiate the competing demands of diverse social worlds” (2008, viii).

I’ve spent my twenty years in education working with students who face significant obstacles on the path to high school graduation and college completion. I always knew which classes I was teaching by how much stuff my kids brought with them to class. I could barely walk the aisles in my AP class, so crowded was it with overloaded backpacks, badminton rackets, and violin cases. Students in my “regular” classes, on the other hand, often strolled in with rolled-up spiral notebooks in their back pockets. Then there were those souls who traveled so lightly that they didn’t even bring a pen to class. On many days, my primary “student engagement technique” was brokering deals between the students without school supplies and their more provident peers so we could all just get on with our work.

For the many low-income, underrepresented, and multilingual students for whom higher education is an alien world, the study and practice of rhetoric offers essential training in the imaginative and empathic capacities that enable writers to write for diverse audiences, purposes, and occasions. Rhetoric helps us inhabit other social worlds and identities. In the final chapter of this book, “Aristotle’s Guide to Becoming a ‘Good’ Student,” you’ll find activities specifically designed to give students a boost of support as they build rhetorical knowledge and academic confidence. If your students could use some extra help *preparing* to be academically prepared, you might want to read Chapter 7 first.

What’s Rhetoric?

Rhetoric targets the conventions and processes of high academic literacy, including the sophisticated responsiveness to context that characterizes college and workplace writing. Writing rhetorically means writing with the attention to argument, purpose, audience, authority, and style demanded by academic texts. It means discovering, as Aristotle explains, the best available means of persuasion—such as the skillful use of evidence and appeals. In the rhetorical tradition, argument and persuasion go hand in hand. We make arguments to persuade people. When the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) call for students to “determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective,” it’s asking

students to analyze the way a writer’s persuasive choices contribute to a text’s meaning and power (NGA/CCSSO 2010, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6).

To use a technology metaphor, rhetoric isn’t just an app that enhances instruction in argumentation; rhetoric is the operating system. As a matter of fact, the study of how to read and write arguments comes to us from the rhetorical tradition. In classical rhetoric, argument was an advanced “assignment” type that students mastered in a sequence of increasingly complex tasks (Corbett and Connors 1999). Rhetoric is larger than argument. If you prefer a nontech metaphor, you might think of rhetoric as the Swiss Army knife of critical communication, of which argument comprises several blades.

In the many centuries following the classical period, argumentation continued to be the bread and butter of rhetoric courses, and rhetoric continued to be a central discipline in schools. Rhetoric has a history older than the idea of public education itself—older, in fact, than Christianity, Euclidian geometry, or the Great Wall of China. Since the fourth century BCE, rhetoric has been standard fare for students. Rhetoricians Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee describe the central importance of rhetoric to civic life in the classical age: “In ancient times, people used rhetoric to make decisions, resolve disputes, and to mediate public discussion of important issues” (2009, 1). While the enduring importance of rhetoric is clear, the meaning of the term can be a little fuzzy.

One of the challenges in trying to fix a definition of rhetoric is that it is both process and product, activity and artifact. As Erika Lindemann (2001) points out in *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, the term *rhetoric* itself can refer alternately to a practice, theory, discipline, or even a type of book (instructors assign a “rhetoric” as the textbook in many college classes).

And then, of course, there are those definitions of rhetoric as “empty words” or “manipulation.” Crowley and Hawhee are quick to rectify misunderstandings of the term:

What often passes for rhetoric in our own time—repeatedly stating (or shouting) one’s beliefs at an “opponent” in order to browbeat him into submission—is not rhetoric. Participation in rhetoric entails that every party to the discussion be aware that beliefs may change during the exchange and discussion of points of view. All parties to a rhetorical transaction *must be willing to be persuaded by good arguments*. (2009, 6; emphasis added)

Composition scholar Andrea Lunsford’s broad and helpful definition of rhetoric suggests its capacity to contain multitudes. She calls rhetoric “the art, practice, and study of human communication” (quoted in Eidenmuller 2014).

Seeing Past the Surface: Teaching Arguments Rhetorically

What you'll find throughout this book are ways to help students see past their first impressions. When we teach students to think about arguments rhetorically, we build up their powers of observation. We want students to pay closer attention to the acts of meaning around them, to notice rhetorical, and yes, persuasive, strategies that might not be apparent at first glance.

Like this, for example. During a visit to the world-famous Monterey Bay Aquarium a few years ago, I noticed an interesting sign in the restroom: “paper towels = trees.” It’s a simple but powerful message. And it makes a clear argument: If we use paper towels, we are consuming trees. Most people who saw this sign likely accepted it as an important conservation reminder without considering the persuasive strategies behind the message. The logical equation of paper to trees seems so reasonable and irrefutable that it’s easy to accept at face value. But if we look at the sign as an argument—a claim requiring support—rather than a statement of fact, we can uncover several choices the writer of this message has made to convince us of its probable truth:

- The equals sign (=) makes the claim seem like a mathematical certainty (*logos*).
- The word *trees* (instead of *wood pulp*, *tree plantation*, or *tree farm*) suggests unspoiled forests (*pathos*).
- The message comes from the Monterey Bay Aquarium—a leader in ocean conservation (*ethos*).
- Placing the sign on paper towel dispensers takes advantage of an opportune moment (*kairos*).

This little argument uses logical, emotional, and character appeals to achieve its purpose: reducing the waste of natural resources. If we dig deeper, we might notice a lack of evidence, qualifiers, or counterarguments. We might also start to question the extent to which we agree or disagree with the message. Does using paper towels really equate to cutting down trees? What are the effects of logging? What about recycled paper or alternative materials? Why doesn’t the aquarium just use electric hand dryers?

When I returned to the Monterey Bay Aquarium this spring, I noticed that the signs in the restrooms had changed to “Even recycled towels started as trees, so please use as few as possible.” (See Figure 1.)

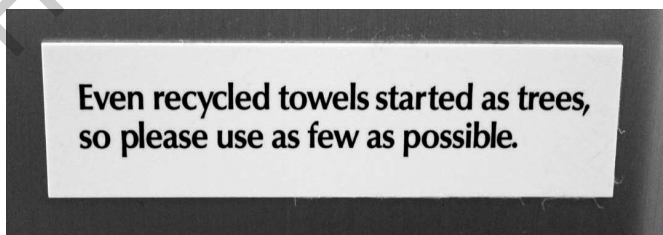


FIGURE 1

Monterey Bay Aquarium’s second, modified sign

I can only guess that the new message and persuasive strategies were in concession to questions and counterarguments like those I raised about the original notice. You can easily imagine the ongoing conversation that led to the modified towel sign.

Our world is full of arguments like these. Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz even suggest that “everything’s an argument” (2010, vii), meaning all the messages we encounter, whether through words or images, have a particular purpose and point of view. Arguments ask for some kind of response. Being college and career ready—or “life ready” as one teacher friend puts it—requires an ability to respond to these messages critically.

The CCSS recognize the connection between proficiency in argumentation and postsecondary success. For instance, many of the CCSS’s Writing Standards for Grades 11–12 affirm the importance of understanding, creating, and supporting arguments. Consider the following:

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
 - a. Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
 - b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.
 - c. Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims. (NGA/CCSSO 2010, CCSS. ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1)

When we analyze and develop arguments, we have to consider more than just the printed words on the page. We have to consider the full social world in which the argument does its work. Arguments try to accomplish something; they seek a specific outcome, a change in people’s actions or beliefs—such as not recklessly wasting paper towels. And to change people, we have to understand them. We have to anticipate their concerns and objections and know the opportune moments and best means to make our pitch. Rhetoric teaches us how to do these things. “When we practice rhetoric,” writes Erika Lindemann in *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, “we make decisions about our subject, audience, point of view, purpose, and message. We select our best evidence, the best order in which to present our ideas, and the best resources of language to express them” (2001, 40–41).