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Core Advanced Writing: Rhetoric of Storytelling

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Course Designs

Core Advanced Writing: Rhetoric of Storytelling

Cruz Medina

Course Description

On September 23, 2020, the *New York Post* reported that “President Trump had signed an executive order expanding a ban on government agencies receiving sensitivity training involving critical race theory to federal contractors” (Moore). By the time this executive order passed, I had already planned to teach a course titled “Rhetoric of Storytelling” that included a Critical Race Theory (CRT) reading from Aja Martinez advocating for counterstory. In response to the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests during the summer of 2020, my academic department, like many institutions nationwide, issued a statement in support of Black Lives Matter. In addition, my department formed a reading group and working group on anti-racist pedagogy that discussed texts and strategies for incorporating more voices of color into curriculum. Still, when my department met at the beginning of the quarter, I was in a breakout session with a white, male colleague, who expressed confusion as to how he might incorporate non-white voices into his first-year and advanced writing courses. With all the shade intended, I told him that the first week alone of first-year writing featured three women of color, Gloria Anzaldúa, Michelle Obama, and Amy Tan.

While “Rhetoric of Storytelling” was not labeled a “diversity” course within my university’s core curriculum, the course meets the advanced writing requirement for all students at my institution, and the inclusion of BIPOC writers and scholars in such a course demonstrates how courses can avoid upholding white supremacist practices that center white voices as authoritative and necessary. Through the inclusion of voices of color, we can recognize authors from diverse backgrounds as holders and creators of knowledge, too. “Rhetoric of Storytelling” looks at the purposes of storytelling across different rhetorical traditions, beginning with Ancient Greek and Roman traditions and traversing African American, Indigenous Latin American, American Indian, feminist, and Latinx rhetorical traditions. The course operates from the assumption that storytelling is an epistemic practice, and that storytelling and narration serve similar, if not the same, purpose as academic writing, drawing on the lived experiences of the writer. In fulfilling the course’s goals, the students are to: 1) formulate and articulate the significance, role and purpose of storytelling based on course material; 2) participate actively and responsibly as a member

of a small learning community to build knowledge on writing, rhetoric, and storytelling; 3) effectively analyze, interpret, and evaluate literary, critical, and theoretical texts; 4) recognize commonplace arguments about storytelling and articulate counterarguments; and 5) design and complete a substantial and original research or writing project.

Description of Institutional Context

My institution is a small liberal arts Jesuit university in Silicon Valley. The course is the third required writing course following a two-sequence first-year writing course called “Critical Thinking and Writing.” According to the Santa Clara University (SCU) catalogue, “Rhetoric of Storytelling”:

Builds on learning in Critical Thinking and Writing courses to deepen familiarity with values, genres, and conventions relevant to particular disciplines such as STEM, Business, Humanities, Arts, or Social Sciences. Stresses research skills connected with analysis and rhetorical reading and writing skills, especially revision with close attention to audience and purpose. Assignments will reflect increased sophistication in critical reading and writing with a purpose for particular audiences. (“Department of English”)

The course meets requirements for the department’s English minor, and it previously met requirements for the Professional Writing (PW) minor (before recent curriculum restructuring to account for non-PW writing faculty’s teaching this course with different topics). The Core Advanced Writing course is meant for students to take in their second, third, or fourth year to reinforce their academic writing practices with attention to information literacy, a fact demonstrated by a library database research session with a university librarian, an annotated bibliography assignment, and a requirement of 20 pages of revised writing over the course of the 10-week quarter.

SCU’s English department has been shifting from a literature-centric undergraduate program to more of an English Studies model where writing studies is centered within the curriculum and faculty research interests. The development of the Professional Writing minor was an integral aspect of creating more dedicated courses for the five rhetoric and composition/technical communications faculty hires in the last several years. The English major also has a writing track that lets students choose between creative writing and professional writing, with consistent popularity in the creative writing track and creative writing minor, despite there only being one tenured professor of creative writing. Still, the professional writing minor has grown in popularity with STEM students, who view the professional writing minor as a more

practical way of diversifying their studies to appear more competitive on graduate school applications. As a part of the minor, professional writing students are required to take part in an internship, and there is a dedicated faculty internship advisor (who receives a course release) to help students through the process of finding and evaluating their post-internship reflection. To address the inequity of the unpaid internship, the university has also developed the REAL program to pay students directly when they participate in unpaid internships, which benefits students with less economic privilege who need to earn money in order to support themselves. Through programs like REAL, the intersectional concerns and issues like economic justice that are raised in courses like “Rhetoric of Storytelling” are addressed through policy that creates more equity for students to gain work experience that they might not have were the program not in place.

Theoretical Rationale

The theoretical assumptions undergirding the course can be connected with expressivist scholars like Wendy Bishop, co-editor of *The Subject is Story*, and Peter Elbow, who is cited by contributors to Bishop’s collection. Expressivism provides writer-centric attention to issues like style, process, and voice; however, expressivism is often inattentive to critical issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, gender, and ability (i.e. voice and style tend to be evaluated according to a white, middle-class, straight male ideal). Qualities that expressivist (Bishop and Ostrom), critical race (Martinez), Indigenous (King et al), and feminist (Spigelman) scholarship share are the resistance to positivist overreliance on empirical evidence and dominant narratives about what academic writing should be. The course content reflects a deliberate anti-racist decision to include an equal amount, if not more, readings by BIPOC scholars than those by white scholars. The inclusion of Indigenous Latin American storytellers and Indigenous American Indian scholars and storytellers grounds the course in non-Western rhetorical traditions and brings attention to the university’s history as a mission dependent upon the forcible removal and conversion of native Ohlone populations (Panich). If this course is effectively taught, storytelling should be understood as a form of argumentation, knowledge-making, and as a powerful rhetorical mode for BIPOC populations to complicate dominant narratives and communicate their lived experiences.

When I first started designing this course, I followed the advice from a professional development workshop that “students like having a central course text.” As my course text, I chose the collection *The Subject is Story*, which could be categorized as expressivist because some writers speak about finding one’s voice and cite Peter Elbow; however, I also liked that the collection had some straightforward rhetorical pieces like a chapter called “Narration and

Argument,” by James Herrick, which speaks to Plato’s use of storytelling. I include that towards the beginning of the quarter because I feel like Plato meets students’ expectations of what will be included in a course with rhetoric in the title. However, I also use Gayle Duskin’s chapter, “Ancient Tradition and Contemporary Storytelling,” which traces the African American rhetorical tradition through spirituals to blues and jazz before discussing the implications of those traditions on hip hop. The majority of the readings from *The Subject is Story* are used in the first assignment, which asks students to make an argument with narrative elements about how they use storytelling, with the requirement that they incorporate quotes from these readings to support their arguments. Effective writing for this assignment includes details, description, or dialogue that help show what the student explains in their analysis. This assignment should conclude with some explanation of what they would like to learn more about storytelling as it relates to their major or future career.

The storytelling topics that students identify at the end of the first assignment become the focus of the proposal assignment that articulates details in the genre of a two-page memo with three headers: Purpose, Significance, and Method/Genre. These headers provide the what, why, and how that students envision for their research project. An Advanced Writing requirement for SCU is an annotated bibliography as a means of instantiating the research writing process into stages. For the choice of projects, I offer digital storytelling videos, podcasts, websites, or traditional alphabetic writing. Successful projects demonstrate elements of storytelling through the communication of researched information.

Because SCU rests on what was formerly a mission (with the mission’s church situated centrally on campus), I have found it particularly important to teach Indigenous writers with specific acknowledgement of SCU’s history as a Catholic mission and the forced conversion of the Ohlone and the Muwekma Ohlone people. In *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story*, Lisa King, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson make the case that educators need to understand rhetorical sovereignty if they want to teach American Indian literature through a meaningful pedagogical lens informed by Indigenous ways of knowing. I pair King, Gubele, and Anderson’s introduction to *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story* with an excerpt from Tommy Orange’s *There There*, where an Indigenous character speaks with another character who is described as a white hipster who moved to Oakland. The hipster, representing a white settler, dismisses the history of people living in the East Bay with the common misreading of Gertrude Stein’s quote about there being “no there there” when describing her hometown: “I mean, no one’s really from here, right? . . . You know what Gertrude Stein said about Oakland?” (Orange 38). However, the narrator explains that in reality Stein describes there being no sign of what she knew

when she grew up there. Orange writes, “But for Native people in this country, all over the Americas, it’s been developed over, buried ancestral land, glass and concrete and wire and steel, unreturnable covered memory. There is no there there” (39). For students in the Bay Area, near Oakland, this scene speaks to the need for rhetorical sovereignty for Indigenous knowledge and respect for the culture and stories of a particular space.

The attention that Tommy Orange pays in *There There* to Native people all over the Americas provides a good introduction into chapters from *I, Rigoberta Menchú* that expose students to Indigenous storytelling from Latin America, specifically Guatemala. I provide a definition of the storytelling tradition of testimonio, the culturally-specific genre that has been attributed to the stories of Rigoberta Menchú, who uses her experiences to bring attention to how her Q’iche’ Maya people were forced from their lands, forced into the military, and tortured and killed by government soldiers. These readings highlight the stakes of storytelling and how it can be used to speak truth to power. Later in the quarter, I include my own chapter, “Digital Testimonio: Latin@ Multimodal Storytelling,” to demonstrate how the genre of testimonio has import for storytelling in digital spaces—digital stories that communicate their research on storytelling are an option for the final assignment, in addition to websites or traditional alphabetic essays. Listening to Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony and reading about digital testimonio often inspires students to think about the potential for how they might be able to speak back to a dominant narrative that misrepresents a population with which they identify.

Towards the end of the quarter, Aja Martinez’s “A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory” brings into focus how storytelling can help BIPOC folks resist dominant narratives. By this time in the quarter, students are receptive to the different purposes that narrative and storytelling can serve. Martinez explains how counterstories respond to the dominant stock stories that are often the official story, the common-sense logic of white supremacy. Martinez explains, “[s]tock stories feign neutrality and at all costs avoid any blame or responsibility for societal inequality. Powerful because they are often repeated until canonized or normalized, those who tell stock stories insist that their version of events is indeed reality” (38). Martinez’s article outlines how counterstory serves as a methodology for Critical Race Theory (CRT) while also providing a counterstory that students can read and interpret through the CRT lens. In the context of the 45th president signing an Executive Order banning federal funding for workshops teaching CRT, this reading helps students understand why storytelling by BIPOC could be seen as a threat to dominant ideological perspectives on history and education that benefit from silencing the minoritized voices through history.

The syllabus for “Rhetoric of Storytelling” is also designed to make the course and its content easily accessible to students. I provide a table of contents, bullet points, gray backgrounds, and two columns on each page are specific rhetorical choices based on accessibility. (The full syllabus and supplemental materials for this course are available on the *Composition Studies* website.) In Anne-Marie Womack’s “Teaching is Accommodation,” she highlights these specific concrete practices for making syllabi accessible for students with different learning abilities. In addition to the visual layout, she argues for “(1) creating accessible document design, (2) engaging students with cooperative language, and (3) empowering students through flexible course plans” (Womack 501). The inclusion of a table of contents was a design recommendation I learned during a workshop at a Computers and Writing conference in 2015, and I would note that I have very seldom had “it’s-on-the-syllabus” moments since including this feature in my syllabi. These preemptive design choices prior to the class can free us, as instructors, to focus on higher order learning goals in the course and relieve the punitive impulse to deduct points for a detail mentioned somewhere in a large block of text on the syllabus.

Critical Reflection

One of the strengths of this course is that the curriculum normalizes writing by BIPOC writers and scholars as part of the standard curriculum. An obvious limitation is the 10-week length of the course. Also, the lower division status of the course can signal fewer readings to students enrolling, thereby impacting the amount of material that can be covered. Even though storytelling in support of argumentation and personal narratives as argumentation are genres of writing that appear in student writing assignments (such as literacy narratives and digital storytelling), these genres are often regarded as less rigorous than genres of academic writing that are perceived as non-personal. Whether or not this assumption about rigor is acknowledged as centering a particular class or whitening an imagined ideal student writer, attempting to de-personalize writing and the value of student experiences by assigning genres of analytical writing that students dislike puts instructors in the uncomfortable position of reading and providing feedback to writing that students often feel less ownership over. (Many readers have no doubt been handed such an essay in a non-committal manner during an individual conference with a student or in a writing center tutorial.) Valuing the stories of writers and scholars of color allows for discussion about which kinds of knowledge and whose knowledge is valued.

Because different rhetorical traditions value storytelling for knowledge-making, argumentation, and activism, I’ve revised this course to rely less centrally on the edited collection *The Subject is Story* and to include more work

by scholars of color. Even though expressivists and post-expressivists argue that they do more than help students find their voice or write to discover something about themselves, African American, Indigenous, Latinx, and CRT scholars raise the stakes beyond learning enough to perform the conventions of academic writing. These traditions teach students stories that inform their understandings of current social injustices, like the abuses of immigrants in detention centers, the murder of Black men and women by police, and the struggle for sovereignty over land and water rights by American Indians against gas corporations and their toxic pipelines. These stories demonstrate how BIPOC writers contribute to the epistemology of the rhetorical tradition by challenging the white supremacist myths about Aristotle and Plato as a part of the Western canon that flows from ancient Athens through the Roman Empire and up through Europe to England and across the Atlantic with slaveowners to the US. These BIPOC writers show students they can hold their instructors to higher standards when it comes to diversifying their syllabi and asking educators to not just sign off on statements of support, but to actually do better.

Perhaps, because the course is a requirement for all students and to appease expectations about what a course on rhetoric should include, I still feel tacitly compelled to include the Herrick chapter that mentions Plato in *The Subject is Story* and the Spigelman article that relies on discussion of Aristotle. During my first year at my institution, I taught an advanced writing course called “Literacy and Social Justice.” In that course, I included Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Tara Yosso’s *Critical Race Counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline*. I had a few white students who actively resisted both texts, willfully misunderstanding the texts and turning the class sessions into a debate with me and a few vocal, progressive students. These resistant students would cite their working-class, white backgrounds as a way of dismissing what Freire and Yosso write about Brazilians in poverty and the broken educational pipeline for Chicana students.¹ By beginning my storytelling course with texts centering Plato and Aristotle, I enact what one of the editors of this issue, Ersula Ore, describes as “strategic self-care” to insulate me “from more pervasive forms of institutional violence” (Ore). More optimistically, I might say that I begin with meeting students where they are and what they know about rhetoric.

Because many of the students in this class tend to be non-English majors, less time is dedicated to explaining the complexities and evolution of ‘expressivism’ (see Eli Goldblatt’s “Don’t Call it Expressivism”). Land acknowledgements have become more standardized on my university campus, so the attention to Indigenous storytelling connects with students. In other classes with more sustained attention to American Indian writers like Sherman Alexie, who has become increasingly problematic because of multiple allegations of sexual mis-

conduct (Associated Press; Neary), students still grapple with understanding why Native American mascots rely on racist stereotypes and other misunderstandings, like the idea that all Native Americans have money from casinos. For example, I've had a student thoughtfully discuss these topics while having a sticker for the Chicago Blackhawks hockey team on her laptop.

In the shadow of Trump's executive order to ban the funding of government entities teaching Critical Race Theory, I am fortunate that my Jesuit institution centers social justice in the mission of the university, even though it continues to struggle—like other institutions—to do better. I've yet to receive pushback from students, and I do not keep an eye on professor watchlists, but the role of policing has always served those in power who choose to subjugate minoritized bodies through policy or brute force. During the summer of 2020, many could no longer ignore the issue of racial injustice as George Floyd's murder played on the news and in social media. In order not to forget, we need to listen by reading and hearing the stories of BIPOC who have been begging to be heard so that police brutality and violence against communities of color doesn't come as a surprise. Instead, these stories should serve as inspiration for broader social and structural change and as reminders that it is imperative we not go back to the old normal.

Notes:

1. My chair also let me know that one of the self-identified white, working class students had contacted my chair to complain about the class. My chair offered his support and let me know confidentially that the student was a non-traditional student who was at least 20 years my senior and who worked at the school in a staff position. This older, white student passed along the criticism to my chair that I "didn't seem like the right fit" for my institution.

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