Alexandra Cequeria

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Rhetoric v. Literature in English: Is There a Connection?

The typical high-school student may first think of English class as simply reading and writing. Once this student enters advanced placement classes, however, she will notice the distinctions between language and literature classes. The term “rhetoric” will appear in her AP Language class, something she probably has not been familiarized with in her prior education. It is at the college level that she will notice the difference between writing about reading and writing about writing.

In this study, I investigate the relationship between literature and rhetoric in the English major. This is done through the acknowledgement of each as a separate discourse community under the larger discourse community of the English department. John Swales (1990) defines a discourse community as “groups that have goals or purposes, and use communication to achieve these goals.” Through my research of both literature and rhetoric assignments, I discovered that despite small commonalities in expectations, the two discourse communities have differentiating styles of writing.

**Literature Review**

There has been debate within the field of English as to whether composition and rhetoric should be housed in an independent department. However, there is also discussion as to whether student writing benefits from both composition and literature classes, despite the tensions between both departments. In this paper, I will investigate if and how these separate departments connect in student writing in the English discipline.

John Swales (1990) conceptualizes a discourse community in his article. He proposes six characteristics that identify a discourse community: a broadly agreed set of common goals, mechanisms of intercommunication among its members, use of participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information, possession of one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims, specific texts, and a threshold level of members (221-222). These characteristics are prevalent in both the rhetoric and literature communities. This article provides fundamental information towards my research, as this paper further investigates these separate discourse communities.

Emily Isaacs (2009) mentions the suspicions of composition studies when advocates of literature integrated general education writing classes make bold declarations of superiority in her article (99). She then emphasizes the “main goal” of universities: to offer writing courses that will most benefit the students. The extent of collaboration between composition and literature departments on this goal is uncertain, depending on the history of conflict.

Peter Elbow, a professor of both literature and composition, describes in his article that there can be a “maintained marriage” between the two departments, if they are open to learn from one another (534). Elbow’s article reflects on how these separate discourse communities can interact and benefit the writing skills of each concentration. His main concerns regard the use of imaginative language in literature that is not apparent in composition, and the practicality of composition that lacks in literature-based writing. The identification of writing styles within each concentration also highlights Swales’s observation of multiple genres in a discourse community.

Stuart Greene (2001) conceptualizes argumentative writing as a conversation in his article. His main point is that every argument one makes is connected to another (29). Because of this, proper writing is developed through the process of identifying an issue, identifying the situation, and framing a good question (30-31).Greene’s idea is particularly relevant in my research, as the argumentative writing that one does in both literature and rhetoric is often based on previous writing or literature.

Rebecca de Wind Mattingly and Patricia Harkin discuss the benefit of rhetoric and composition as a major for research-intensive universities in their article. They argue that students that are more technologically literate would benefit in learning how to write in a formal setting (15). Students who are considered “good” writers would also be able to explore writing beyond the correctness that characterizes certain English programs (17). The two then argue that, in a larger sense, universities would benefit from a rhetoric and composition major by providing a lucrative and multidisciplinary focus (20). This article applies to my research in that this argument again separates rhetoric from literature.

**Data Collection**

For this study, I decided to collect assignments given to students in both literature and rhetoric classes. The literature assignments were from a British Literature class, a Literature of Diversity class, and a Young Adult Literature class. The rhetoric assignment was from a Technical Writing class. I also interviewed an upperclassmen English major. She has little experience with rhetoric and has primarily taken literature classes for her major.

**Data Findings**

The assignments revealed that while both rhetoric and literature are separate discourse communities, there are some commonalities in the expectations of the assignments and the strategies used to complete the assignments.

*Genre*

The data represented the different genres within each discourse community. The assignments given to literature classes were primarily literary analysis. The assignments given to rhetoric classes, however, varied from artifact analysis to formulating an instruction manual.

In both the literature and rhetoric assignments, there were certain freedoms regarding the student’s topic. Particularly in the rhetoric assignment about instructional manuals, students were encouraged to find a topic relevant to their field. This shifts the rhetoric community away from the English department, as students with other majors besides English take rhetoric classes.

*Common Strategies*

When discussing strategies used to write effectively in literature classes, the English major student emphasized evidence. She explains, “I would say you have to…use a lot of evidence…make sure you use a lot of evidence from the text to back up your point, or else it’s not going to be valid at all….” Evidentiary support was then emphasized in the assignment expectations: “You should use copious examples from the text…to support your claims about the text.” This establishes that in literature classes, evidence from the primary text is essential to make a strong argument.

*Connection: Argument as a Conversation*

Several literature assignments made connections toward Greene’s “Argument as a Conversation”, an important idea in the rhetoric community. Despite an emphasis on evidentiary support, the British Literature assignment expected a student’s analysis to “add something new to the discussion about the work.” The assignment also called for a student to “participate and intervene” in the conversation about a certain work’s use of literary devices. This process was further explored in the interviewed student’s recall of an assignment for her other British Literature class: “…our final paper was to compare a Restoration writer to a Romantic writer…I did Alexander Pope and Lord Byron for their use of irony and sarcasm, so I would look up…articles…and then I found someone who did something kind of similar to that, so I used their article.” She found historical context for a certain argument and utilized it in her own original argument, which is a similar process to which Greene describes.

*Overall Connections*

While there were minor connections between the ideas of both the rhetoric and literature communities, there was not enough evidence to make a strong connection between the two. Several of the literature assignments suggested discussing rhetorical or stylistic techniques, but they were in the context of a certain piece of literature. The rhetorical assignments focus more on stylistic techniques in writing in a broader context, even branching out to other disciplines.

There is also the difference in evidentiary support. While literature sometimes focuses on the text and nothing but the text, rhetoric calls for artifacts from different mediums, such as texts from everyday life or even architecture. Arguments made in literature class also are made valid through the primary text.

**Discussion**

This study has revealed that even though I am an English major, I will primarily take literature classes, unless I make the decision to minor in rhetoric. This changes my expectations of writing over the course of my English education. The most important process of writing in literature classes is extracting evidence from the primary text.

The most evident finding in this study is that rhetoric and literature are less connected than commonly thought. Rhetoric and literature are different discourse communities, and the two should never be mistaken for being an umbrella community under the English disclipline. This research can be applied to Elbow’s article, as the two communities do have the potential to learn from and benefit one another.

**Implications**

The basic concept is that rhetoric is its own discourse community individual from the English major. One may have a negative experience in literature class and assume that they are unskilled in English as a whole. However, the research in this study explores the idea that this is not always the case. Rhetoric is a community more open to other majors that are also writing intensive. For example, a student majoring in business who struggles through an analysis of Shakespeare may find more ease and enjoyment in a technical writing class. Those who have an interest in writing itself rather than interpretations of writing can minor in rhetoric and composition without having to take literature-based classes. Teachers may notice similarities in their expectations between rhetoric and literature classes, particularly through Greene’s idea of argument as conversation. The tensions between the discourse communities, if existent in certain universities, can be dissolved through further understanding of each discourse community.

Works Cited

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