

From Greek to Geek

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Like Nan Johnson and [Krista Ratcliffe](#), I too have noticed that the number of 4Cs panels devoted to topics in the history of rhetoric appears to be dwindling;[[1](#)] I haven't gone back through copies of the annual convention program to validate what I think I've noticed, but given that others have noticed it as well, I will take it as given that the history of rhetoric no longer attracts as much attention at 4Cs as it did say 10 years ago,[[2](#)] and I will speculate instead about the significance of rhetoric's diminishing profile at 4Cs. While we might start to worry about the future of rhetoric as a discipline given its current status at the most widely attended writing conference, it may simply be that, given the tremendous growth of both the Rhetoric Society of America and the International Society for the History of Rhetoric, rhetoric no longer needs 4Cs. And yet the word rhetoric still appears regularly in the Speech Communication convention programs, and if the people who teach speech still feel a need to discuss rhetoric beyond the conferences exclusively devoted to it, while writing teachers apparently don't feel that need, then perhaps interest in the history of rhetoric is waning among writing teachers, or at least in so far as the profession is reflected in the panels at 4Cs. Interestingly enough, one of the two apparently historical sessions I noticed this last year was "The Greeks and Their Techniques: Is Classical Rhetoric Relevant to Our Classes?" (D17). The other was "Reviving Rhetoric."

As [Crowley](#) observes, at least one of the original purposes for composition's connecting with rhetoric was to legitimate a career path that, despite its utility and democratic spirit, lacked academic viability. Like community service, teaching writing has always been more valued than valuable, and the people who wanted tenure track jobs and the respect of their tenured colleagues needed a disciplinary identity that would be identified as one by other members of the academy. Too close an association with "mere writing instruction" was professionally detrimental. But association with rhetorical history gave writing instruction everything that other legitimate humanistic disciplines have, textual debates, archaeology, linguistics, history, theory, enough material to sustain a couple of university press series, several conferences, and a handful of journals. Three generations of scholars have now been tenured by this route, if we choose to count from Corbett and Winterowd. There are now healthy contingents of rhetoric scholars in many universities, and the call for new Ph.D.s to teach writing seems loud as ever. So why aren't we talking much about rhetoric anymore at 4Cs?

A few years back there were several uncontested charges of andro- and ethnocentricity leveled at the tradition, an attitude which I think I've seen reflected in my students' increasingly tepid reception to books that still

fascinate me 20 years after Nan Johnson first introduced me to them when I studied with her at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada.

It may be that 4Cs concern with inclusion and popular culture and the next new thing makes rhetoric seem old-fashioned and "traditional" in the pejorative sense: esoteric, arcane, and technical on the one hand, elitist, aristocratic, and sexist on the other. Certainly if this is the attitude taken by young scholars today, the future of classical rhetoric is in trouble and the history of rhetoric will become a narrative of oppression, while the narrative of modern "rhetorics" will become the rhetoric of liberation. We dig up Aristotle every 100 years or so in order to bury him good and proper again.

There is another distinct possibility and that is that there are many new and therefore more enticing avenues to travel in the world of composition. There are the political issues raised by the increasing numbers of untenured people teaching composition, and related work issues for graduate students. There's the abolitionist movement coupled with an increasing tendency to wrest first year composition away from English departments and set it up in separate writing programs, staffed by a few, in some cases a very few, rhetoric specialists and by a great many adjunct faculty. And there is the influence of modern language studies' fascination with popular culture which ties in much more neatly with current student experience; and then there is the new world of electronic writing, offering new forms, new forums, and perhaps even new rhetorics.

For what it's worth, I can offer a bit of personal narrative that, though it is idiosyncratic, might encourage others to add their personal narratives. If we assembled enough of these we might have a clearer perception of what has been happening in the field. Many of these would be fascinating. My own, I'm afraid, is mundane. I've taught a graduate seminar in the history of rhetoric for 14 years. I've played a central role in developing an undergraduate writing program that has a significant historical component, and I've published a few pieces on the history of rhetoric. I arrived at a point a few years ago, however, when I realized I would have to learn classical Greek if I were to continue pursuing the history of rhetoric in the way I had been, something which I know many of my colleagues have done, but about which I had some doubts. In the time I've been teaching graduate students about the history of rhetoric, I've only had two who were interested in historical matters, and my undergraduates are more familiar with Homericles than Homer. So I taught myself html and then php and then mysql, and I published a piece in *Computers and Composition*, and my most recent piece of writing is a piece of software, a free weblog system (<http://rhetcomp.gsu.edu/blogs>). It's not like I've abandoned the history of rhetoric. In fact I'm developing a new graduate seminar in the Hellenistic period. The widely varied nature of the field of rhetoric, I think, has made a tight focus on its history impossible for me.

The last time I read a paper on rhetoric at 4Cs there were three people in

the audience and even one of the speakers didn't show up. Last year I participated in a weblog workshop that had 10 speakers and 28 participants who *paid* to attend.

In the end, I teach writing, not composition and not rhetoric.

Notes

1. D.26 Reviving Rhetoric in the Two-Year College (121). D.17 The Greeks and Their Techniques: Is Classical Rhetoric Relevant to Our Classes. 117 ([Back](#))

2. To do this properly, of course, one would need to go back through the catalogues and catalogue the entries with history of rhetoric or rhetorical history topics in the titles. I don't have access to this body of texts. ([Back](#))

Works Cited

Crowley, Sharon. "Composition Is Not Rhetoric." *Enculturation* 5.1 (Fall 2003): http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/crowley.html

Ratcliffe, Krista. "The Current State of Composition Scholar/Teachers: Is Rhetoric Gone or Just Hiding Out?" *Enculturation* 5.1 (Fall 2003): http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/ratcliffe.html

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