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Burke, Ratcliffe, Glenn, and the Commonplaces in the Field of Composition and Rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

In the field of Composition and Rhetoric, the notion of persuasion is foundational to what is taught in writing courses, what gets published in scholarly journals, and historically, what has been focused on as the motivation for written and oral discourse. The concept of persuasion and rhetoric can be traced back to Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, but is no less studied or discussed by modern-day rhetors. In section one of this paper, I will be putting Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kris Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, and Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* in conversation with each other to show what the field of Composition and Rhetoric has said about persuasion, listening, and silence. Section two of this paper will reflect on how disruptive Ratcliffe and Glenn's work is to commonplaces in the field and will discuss ways in which listening and silence continue to be under-examined and seemingly unvalued. In the third and final section of this paper, I will demonstrate how this work on listening and silence in rhetoric could inform my theories and praxis of mindfulness as a composition instructor.

PART ONE: Burke, Ratcliffe, and Glenn in Conversation

In the twentieth century, rhetor Kenneth Burke published extensively on the topic of persuasion and argument. In his seminal text, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke states, "Rhetoric is

the art of persuasion, or a study of the means of persuasion available for any given situation” (46). From this basic definition, Burke then postulates that a speaker persuades an audience by “the use of stylistic identifications” (46). A speaker may try to persuade an audience by identifying common interests to build rapport, and the audience may start to identify so strongly with a speaker that consubstantiality, or identifying with something or someone so strongly there is a common association, even an extension of two separate entities occurs. Burke states that a “doctrine of consubstantiality” could be “necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an *act*; and a way of life is *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*’ (21). What, specifically, is motivating the speaker to persuade, or the audience to identify with a speaker, could be almost anything.

When discussing authors and persuasion, Burke uses the phrase “margin of persuasion” to define an act of convincing a reader to identify with the author’s motives. In *Counter-Statement*, Burke proposes that this phrase is “the means whereby the author can reduce the recalcitrant reader to acquiescence, the means whereby the Symbol, though remote from the reader, can be made to appeal for reasons intrinsic to the author’s intention” (176). The methods Burke presents, as a means of persuading a reader or audience, sound downright cunning and even somewhat violent. Burke continues in *Counter-Statement* by claiming, “The thoroughness of the artist’s attack can ‘wear down’ the reader until he accepts the artist’s interpretation” (176). Thus far, it would seem that Burke, well-read and aware of the rhetorical traditions of the past, has theorized persuasion to be a highly sophisticated and even psychological undertaking which can successfully be achieved by a speaker or author that has mastered *his* rhetorical tools (for

Burke, writing primarily in the first half of the twentieth century, always used a masculine pronoun).

Two rhetorical arts under-examined in Burke's discussions of persuasion are listening and silence. With great respect for the theory and concepts that came from the mind of Kenneth Burke, who is an often-cited critic and innovator in the field during his lifetime, his notions of persuasion leave something to be desired in the discussion of marginalized individuals and the collaborative relationship an author or speaker should understand to get their point across. Krista Ratcliffe discusses listening as a rhetorical act in *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Burke talks of identification, but how can one possibly identify with a speaker or author who they feel excluded from or alienated by? Ratcliffe asks, "And how do power differentials of particular standpoints and cultural logics influence our ability to listen?" (3). Race and gender, and assumptions that come along with such identities can complicate matters further—to say the least. In speaking specifically to Burke's rhetorical theories of identification and persuasion, Ratcliffe states, "But identifications, especially cross-cultural identifications, are sometimes difficult to achieve. Such identifications may be troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance" (2). In an effort to examine the problematic nature of this notion, Ratcliffe asked herself how many people were employing "rhetorical listening to foster *conscious* identifications" across divides of culture and gender (2)? In essence, Burke's definitions of identification are limited, and Ratcliffe seeks to address those limitations in order to fill in the gap in the field.

Is it possible that Burke did not imagine a world in which cross-cultural communication would be necessary? It seems more likely that Burke found his methods to be universal. Ratcliffe

contends, “Granted, Burke’s identification does provide a place of personal agency and a place of commonality, yet it often does so at the expense of differences. As a place of common ground, Burke’s identification demands that differences be bridged. The danger of such a move is that differences and their possibilities, when bridged, may be displaced and mystified” (53). In this way, Ratcliffe claims that Burke’s limiting definitions of identity call for “postmodern concepts of identification and disidentification that engage differences” (60). So how can rhetorical listening help? Ratcliffe answers, “In a place of non-identification, people may *act* in a variety of ways. They may pause and reflect on people, places, and things that are similar, different, and unknown. They may exercise their capacity and willingness to listen to themselves and others” (75). Ratcliffe draws from the work of several other theorists in her text, including two references to Cheryl Glenn, a collaborator of Ratcliffe’s on a collection of essays on the rhetorical arts of listening and silence.

Cheryl Glenn’s work often asks who may speak while others are listening and who is silenced. The mere existence of Ratcliffe’s and Glenn’s collection of essays, *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, suggests their complimentary disruption to traditional theories of persuasion. In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Cheryl Glenn talks about what Ratcliffe does with listening as a “productive pathway to rhetorical invention” (152) and further states, “silence and silencing also provide new pathways and new methods for expanding the rhetorical tradition” (153). Early on in the text, Glenn discusses the juxtaposition of the imposition of silence and as a function of strength (xix). She asks questions such as, “who may speak, who may listen or who will agree to listen, and what can be said” (1). Glenn, not unlike Ratcliffe takes culture, history, and gender into carefully defined consideration when addressing the act of

silencing marginalized populations for rhetorical purposes and the potentially empowering act of choosing silence.

Using silence as an act of agency can transform a rhetorical situation. Glenn states, “For those rhetors who practice the art at its deeper levels, a rhetoric of silence, as a means of rhetorical delivery, can be empowered action, both resistant and creative,” Glenn continues, “silence continues to be, too often, read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power” (155). How does this idea translate into classroom practice? In section three of this paper I will discuss how it has and can impact my work with mindfulness in the classroom, but here is what Glenn has to say about mindfulness or meditation in the classroom. She introduces the concept through a few scholars who do work with silence, contemplation, and meditation—all components of a mindful classroom. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the term mindfulness to denote clam, center, and focus in the prewriting and drafting stages of the writing process. Mindfulness is living in the present moment as free from distraction as possible. Meditation is a method of achieving a mindful state by focusing on the breath for a period of time until a student feels calm and focused in approaching a writing task. Writing mindfully is not the only way to achieve success in writing, but can be a helpful tool for many students in approaching the writing process with a clear head and free from distraction.

Glenn mentions several scholars who correlate silence and meditation as effective practices in the field of composition and rhetoric. One scholar she cites is James Moffett, an educator who has decades of work and publication dealing with this very subject. In a 1982 volume of *College English*, Moffett states, “Writing and meditating are naturally allied

activities” (231). Glenn cites, from this same article, Moffett discussing the merits of using mediation to get students to develop what he calls, “inner speech” which he claims can help students “talk through to silence and through stillness find original thought” (240). Silence in meditation, by this measure, can help students hone in and find that expressive creativity Glenn references. Glenn also mentions scholar Pat Belanoff, who wrote an article dealing with the idea of how silence can be used in marginalized communities as an oppressive act and also how it can be a useful tool in literacy. Belanoff discusses the notion of contemplation and reflection as a compositionist and rhetorician, but also through her work in Medieval literature studies. She states, “Am I saying that everyone needs to reflect to be educated? Yes, in a way I am—but at the same time I recognize that there are many ways to reflect” (416). I agree with this assertion and relate it back to mindfulness and writing as I did previously. Reflecting, meditating, and contemplating are not the only ways students can approach a writing project, but they are useful tools students can access should they need to.

Before moving on to part two of this paper, I want to give Glenn the final word in this conversation on argument, listening, and silence in composition and rhetoric. At the end of *Unspoken* Glenn states, “A rhetoric of silence has much to offer, especially as an imaginative space that can open possibilities between two people or within a group. Silence in this sense, is an invitation into the future, a space that draws us forth” (160). So how does this idea of listening and silence disrupt some commonplaces in the field of composition and rhetoric? I will attempt to answer that question in one specific way in the next section of this paper and discuss how the field continues to undervalue these rhetorical arts.

PART TWO: Disrupting Commonplaces in the Field through Application of Ratcliffe and Glenn

The CCCC's annual convention 2020 call for papers is "Considering Our Commonplaces." The call invites proposals to essentially interrogate the effectiveness of steps taken in the field of composition and rhetoric toward inclusivity with a focus on our commonplaces. It also encourages proposals to examine the convention itself as a commonplace of the field. If a commonplace is generally understood as a statement or bit of knowledge, and in this case perhaps even an event or mode of knowledge sharing, commonly engaged with by members of an audience or discourse community, then I had to ask myself what commonplaces were prevalent in the field when I think of listening and silence as rhetorical arts. As I was, ahem, silently reflecting (sorry, but I was!) on this issue, I searched around a few articles on silence in composition and rhetoric. I was pleasantly surprised to stumble upon an article by UH-Mānoa's very own Daphne Desser dealing with this same idea that summed up how I feel about the subject very accurately. Desser was writing about the feminist rhetorics of Glenn and Ratcliffe and was putting their notions of silence and listening into conversation with the book review genre. Before diving into the bulk of her article Desser makes a point that felt very familiar to me as I have relayed my research in meditation for writing to other colleagues and professors in the field. Desser states,

Thus, even as I engage in these projects, I question whether the work of a feminist rereading of silence and of rhetorically listening, as well as my proposed reframing of the book review to make room for these intellectual strategies, is too akin to the expressivists' "ethic of care," too close to maternal teaching, too linked to the social/cultural expectation that women attend to the unexpressed,

attend to the rejected and misunderstood, attend to voices we find infuriating and destructive, too tied to the construction of woman as nurturer, the female teacher as mother, the good girl, the polite professional woman—all roles female academics veer from or take on at their own risk. (Desser 313)

And to that I say yes, and absolutely. Why is work with silence, listening, contemplation, reflection, and meditation in the writing process dismissed as something that was done back in the expressivists period as if it could have no bearing on successful writing in student work presently? I have encountered such a reaction from one professor who I admire greatly, but feel disappointed at this person's seeming dismissal at something that is working well in my own classroom. Additionally, I have been met with more than one condescending comment amongst a few professors in my department that my "yogi lit" methods are so nurturing, but not rigorous. I should note that anyone who has said something along those lines to me has never actually been in my classroom to observe my pedagogy or methods and could therefore never know just how effectively it contributes to the learning environment and resulting rigor in my classroom.

All of the fraughtness over this issue is a form of oppressive self-silencing. Desser states, "Neither Ratcliffe, Glenn, nor I would argue that it is best to unreflectively choose silence over the risks and challenges involved in public debate, for that sort of silencing of the self can be just as unproductive as agonistic debate" (321). So, when I reflect on what method has most successfully turned out great writing in my classroom I return to my mindful methodology. The traditional methods of scaffolding writing assignments throughout the semester, creating outlines, working with tutors in and outside of the classroom, peer editing, and revision are all great, tried-and-true methods that help as well. But none of those traditional methods take into

consideration how students can first think about what they will write and how they can actually get down to the business of completing all of those tasks if they are having trouble focusing.

What happens when a teacher of composition silences a pedagogical practice that has proven effective in her classroom through quantitative study, purely because her methods are viewed as somehow more nurturing, feminine, and therefore not rigorous? Burke's approach to argument is foundational to the field of composition and rhetoric, but it was too narrow in scope and Ratcliffe and Glenn fill in those gaps nicely. In this same way, the narrow scope of traditional methods in prewriting and drafting stages of the writing process are commonplaces achieving successfully articulated papers, but the under-examined aspect of this process is how to reach the students who cannot begin to even approach the writing process due to a variety of reasons that meditation in the prewriting stage can address such as, technological distraction, anxiety, and fear of failure.

Ratcliffe's work on listening was published in 2005 and Glenn's work on silence was published in 2004. Both have been widely read, cited, and presented on in the field of composition and rhetoric. Keeping in mind that the field has had over a decade to digest these concepts, I can't help but wonder why listening and silence are such undervalued rhetorical arts in the academy? Why am I still met with inquisitive looks when I bring up reflective methods in my classroom among some of my colleagues and professors? I think the answer must lie in Dessler's momentary pause quoted above. Bringing the rhetorical arts of listening and silence into the classroom is met with fear because certain commonplaces in the classroom are more time-honored and perhaps, therefore, deemed more rigorous. This does little in reaching the students who need a method of approaching their writing, of clearing their mind to write with

calm and focus, and of listening to the students who have been oppressively silenced. In the third and final section of this paper I will briefly examine how using a less conventional method of mindfulness in my classroom has contributed to my pedagogy of listening for the students who may have been marginalized, silenced, or erased in the classroom in the past and how we can use mindful, reflective silence to empower them as writers.

PART THREE: Listening, Silence, and Mindfulness in my First-Year Writing Classroom

On the first day of class, I have my students write a letter about their past experiences in English classes, their fears and anxieties for the semester in my course, what they hope to learn from the course, and anything else I can do to address their particular needs and worries during our time together. In other words, I listen. Listening becomes a powerful rhetorical act right at the beginning of our time together as teacher and student. I have been amazed at the heartache of past injustices and erasure in English classrooms students share with me through their letters. I make note of each concern and use this information to build my course accordingly as I strongly believe in a student-centered classroom.

Also on the first day of class, we sit in meditative silence together. I assess the familiarity with mindfulness in the classroom and start introducing breathing techniques students can use to clear their minds right from the start. We practice together. Many students are familiar with these techniques, but there is still an air of nervous vulnerability in the room as we all participate in something unusual together. This is the first day we have been together as a class and we are audibly breathing in and out through our noses instead of going over course requirements like every other class on campus. I do this as a method of inclusivity. Half of my students are L2

learners from various international countries and they often express in their letters to me that they are intimidated by being in a classroom with so many native speakers. The fact of the matter is there are many different levels of writing in the room regardless of language ability and participating in this first-day intro to mindfulness techniques together puts us all on an even playing field for that moment. We are all trying something new together to help improve our approach to writing. Even some of the kids who seem too restless to settle down in silence have communicated appreciation for the opportunity to try something new to help their writing approach.

After our silent breathing or mediation, we write to instrumental music. I usually have a prompt written on the board that goes with the theme of our literature for the day or that asks them to approach a step in the paper we are working on. At the beginning of the semester, the students seem to struggle to fill two minutes of sustained writing. I remind them periodically to do their best to keep their pens and pencils moving the entire time. By the end of the semester, our practice has gradually built their stamina and students are able to write for any amount of time I assign with ease.

We frequently work through the things we have written during this time in pairs after the music has stopped. Sometimes we even share as a whole group. I build this sharing into the class culture. Students are frequently pensive and reluctant to share the first week of class and quickly seem to outgrow that recalcitrant behavior by the end of the semester. Hearing from students who have expressed feelings of marginalization in the past due to silencing and erasure helps me to feel that this form of contemplative pedagogy is not just fluff or mere nurture, but valid methods at achieving rigorous classroom success. The ease with which students arrive at

successful and effective papers is a vast improvement from my time as a teacher before I used mindfulness in the classroom. Although I have no concrete way of proving that mindfulness is the key to this marked change, as I could just be improving as a teacher by having more experience or the students could simply be benefiting from any other steps of the writing process we practice in class, I can't help but notice a marked change in the learning environment after our meditation is complete for the day. Additionally, multiple students each semester share with me that they use the mindful methods we practice in class outside of the classroom for our writing assignments and other homework with success. The relief many of them express to me in having a tool they can access when they need to find calm and focus in sitting down to work is reason enough for me to keep going.

This method is not unique to me and my pedagogical practices. As demonstrated in the previous section of this paper, other educators have been using this method, or one similar to it, for decades and more will continue to find success with it in their classrooms. Any teacher is capable of helping their students find calm and focus in their writing approach by following similar steps. In this way, students will have time to process complex thoughts, break through to original concepts they can write about, and therefore have something to contribute to class discussions where they might have previously felt put on the spot or perhaps silenced.

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