

The History of Rhetoric beyond Aristotle

This lesson is designed to be used in a two day a week class with classes lasting an hour and fifteen minutes.

Unit Objectives

Students will be able to:

- recognize the cultural influence on language use and public speaking.
- identify the characteristics of ancient Chinese, ancient Middle Eastern, and African rhetoric.
- critically analyze the effect of race and culture on content across disciplines.
- craft a reflection explaining the similarities and differences of Greek rhetoric to Chinese, Egyptian, Assyrian, or African rhetoric.
- become aware of the missing voices in history and seek them out.

Missing Voices in History

Prior to class, students read the chapter in their Oral Communication book which addresses the history of Aristotle, the Greeks, and rhetoric. Using this knowledge as a launching off point, start a discussion about the presence of (or lack of) other cultures in the discipline.

- Begin class with a low risk writing activity. Ask students to answer the following question: “Based on your reading, what is the history of rhetoric?” Give students five minutes to write.
- When students are finished writing, ask them to share their responses. Depending on the text you use, they may address the canons of Rhetoric, Sophists, Aristotle, etc.
- Ask students, “Based on this reading, do you think other cultures had a history of rhetoric and public speaking?” Answers will vary.
- Explain that most textbooks only include the Greek roots of rhetoric and neglect to cover how other cultures developed and used rhetoric. Ask students to hypothesize about this.
- Tell students during the next two class periods, we will be discussing the use of rhetoric in Eastern cultures to have access to diverse approaches to communicating.
- Explain for this semester, rhetoric is defined as “the use of speaking and/or writing to persuade or influence people.”
- Begin lecture. (Alternatively, students could be given readings/articles for the cultures which they would then teach to the class. Students could also be given a webquest with a series of questions to answer about each culture’s rhetorical history. Given the limited information available, a lecture may be the most efficient use of time to get the information across to students.)

The Middle East (Cradle of Civilization)

- I. Hallo (2004) argues rhetoric emerged in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq and Syria).
 - a. Used cuneiform. Written records from this time include archives, monuments, annals, and canons.

Nicole Brennan – NCA Panel Presentation “Social Justice in the Basic Course: Connecting Content and Citizenship,” November 2013

- b. New research has uncovered records of proverbs, disputations (debates), diatribes, and epics (ex. Gilgamesh).
 - c. Annals provided a specific rhetorical purpose. Annals were a written record of military campaigns.
 - i. Provided a version of history
 - ii. Celebrated the leadership of the king
 - iii. Lacked a conclusion to indicate an ongoing process
 - d. Like Greece, Mesopotamia had public speaking arenas. Both men and women were literate and could contribute.
- II. Modern day perceptions of ancient Assyrian/Mesopotamian speech are frequently incorrect because it is viewed through a Eurocentric lens.
- a. Eurocentric interpretations consider Mesopotamian speech “barbaric” and was othered.
 - b. Mesopotamian speech does not make a distinction between the mind and body. There are no gendered pronouns so gender is not distinguished in writing.

Chinese Rhetoric

- I. The study of Chinese rhetoric.
 - a. The purpose of rhetoric is to build relationships and come to a consensus.
 - i. Persuasion viewed skeptically. Persuasion should be done through love and not “verbal dominance” (116).
 - ii. Rhetoric was “intertwined with philosophy and ethics” (447).
 - iii. Concerned with values and having a good character.
 - b. Silence considered an important tool.
 - c. Speech was “encouraged and speakers enjoyed impressive reputations” as “elites [and] wise men” (456).
 - d. “Flowery” or “glib” speech was not trusted. The ancient Chinese were wary of eloquence.
 - e. When trying to change minds, individuals used remonstrance instead of persuasion.
- II. Considering culture.
 - a. Eurocentric views of Chinese culture led to a conclusion the Chinese did not have a system of rhetoric.
 - b. A lot of research used translations instead of the original language leading to incorrect conclusions.
 - c. *Bian* translates roughly to argumentation and is a “synonym (not equivalent) of ‘rhetoric’” (451).
 - d. It’s important to avoid making broad generalizations as “Chinese cultural values” changed during its 5000 year recorded history.

African Rhetoric (Adapted heavily from Dr. Alfred C. Snider’s blog African American Rhetoric)

- I. Ancient Egyptian rhetoric valued morality and citizenship. (This could also be discussed with African rhetoric)
 - a. *Maat* is both a cultural concept and a goddess.
 - i. *Maat* means what is right.

Nicole Brennan – NCA Panel Presentation “Social Justice in the Basic Course: Connecting Content and Citizenship,” November 2013

- ii. Maat taught through texts about appropriate behavior used in education settings. (Only 1% of the population was literate)
 - b. Eloquence and persuasion were valued.
 - c. Egypt’s ancient legal system required individuals to represent themselves. Persuasive orators used devices such as rhetorical questions, counter arguments, parallelism, repetition, and emotion.
 - d. Language was viewed as magic because words had the power to transform.
- II. Nommo “the creative power of the word” and emerges from the Dogon of Mali. Nommo is like a seed planted in an individual which spreads through communication. It is also linked to spirituality and the linguistic creation of reality.
- III. African rhetoric is concerned about more than using persuasion to change minds and isn’t limited to the elite.
- IV. Five Canons of Kemetic (Egyptian) Rhetoric
 - a. Silence (self control)
 - b. Good timing
 - c. Restraint
 - d. Fluency
 - e. Truthfulness
- V. Four Ethical Concerns of African Rhetoric
 - a. Dignity and the rights of the human person
 - b. Well-being and flourishing of the community
 - c. Integrity and value of the environment
 - d. Reciprocal solidarity and cooperation of humanity
- VI. Rhetoric is considered an art and has a system of aesthetics.
- VII. Many African tribes have a strong oral tradition and no system of writing. This affects communication in the following ways: Orality is
 - a. Immediate and direct
 - b. Speaker and audience are one
 - c. Common and everyday, not isolated and elevated
 - d. Spontaneous and not rehearsed
 - e. Improvised for the purpose and situation
 - f. Ethics, critical thinking, and personal logic are important. The discourse is exploratory and lacks a linear structure.

Discussion/Debrief

- Ask students to take a few minutes to write about what they’ve heard, any thoughts they have, any surprises, or questions.
- Once students have finished writing, ask them to volunteer their thoughts to the class. If discussion does not occur, the following questions could be used to start discussion:
 - Based on your reading of Greek rhetoric and what you’ve learned today, what are the similarities and differences between each culture’s approaches to rhetoric?
 - Does culture play a role on rhetoric and persuasion? Why or why not? In what ways?
 - What effect does using a Eurocentric approach to viewing other cultures have on our interpretations? Why is that?

Nicole Brennan – NCA Panel Presentation “Social Justice in the Basic Course: Connecting Content and Citizenship,” November 2013

- Given what you’ve learned today, how can you evaluate information better?
- Do you think it’s important to learn about other cultures’ uses of rhetoric? Why or why not?

Assessment

A variety of activities or assignments could be given to conclude this lesson. Students could do a reflective writing assignment, a creative project using the concepts they’ve learned, or be given the task of telling someone else about the complex history of rhetoric.

Sources Consulted

Campbell, K. E. (2006). Rhetoric from the ruins of African antiquity. *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 24(3), 255-274.

Hutto, D. (2002). Ancient Egyptian rhetoric in the old and middle kingdoms. *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 20(3), 213-233.

Lipson, C., & Binkley, R. A. (2004). *Rhetoric before and beyond the Greeks*. Albany: State University of New York Press. Retrieved from <http://ehis.ebscohost.com>

Lu, X., & Frank, D. A. (1993). On the study of ancient Chinese rhetoric/Bian. *Western Journal of Communication*, 57(Fall), 445-463.

Snider, A. C. (2010, January 27). Lecture – introduction to African rhetorical theory part 1 [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://africanamericanrhetoric.blogspot.com/2010/01/lecture-introduction-to-african.html>

Snider, A. C. (2010, February 3). Afrocentric rhetorical theory, part 2 [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://africanamericanrhetoric.com/2010/02/afrocntric-rhetorical-theory-part-2.html>

Additional Resources

Kennedy, G. (1998). *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-cultural Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.