

## A Rhetorical Education in the Arts

What do we want BA students to learn about communication in their degree program? At the University of Alberta, we are actively pursuing an answer to this question as we consider revising the BA degree.

In a recent award-winning article, Professor Doug Brent of the University of Calgary noted that we could define “rhetorical education” narrowly as the courses students take explicitly in how to write. Alternatively, rhetorical education could be defined broadly as all life experiences (in and out of school) that contribute to communication competency. Instead of either extreme, Brent adopts what he calls a middle ground—rhetorical education is the “sum of institutionalized practices in the postsecondary education system that help a student develop rhetorical knowledge and skill” (Brent 2012, p. 559).

But what makes up “rhetorical knowledge?” Brent adopts Anne Beaufort’s definition: discourse community knowledge; rhetorical knowledge; genre knowledge; subject matter knowledge; writing process knowledge; and a mental schema for learning to write (Brent, 2012, 560). As undergraduates, Arts students learn about the values and ideas of the professors and students in their major areas of study (discourse community knowledge). They learn about how to write for these people and for what purposes (rhetorical knowledge), and they build knowledge about the genres of documents that they must create to engage in academic study (genre knowledge). Subject matter knowledge comes from reading and writing in courses in their major, and writing process knowledge comes, partly from trial and error and partly from guidance from instructors through linked assignments and the reading of drafts of final papers. But how do they develop the mental schemas that allow them to communicate in novel circumstances, such as work outside the academy?

Brent isn’t sure how this happens. But he is sure that students do develop a considerable degree of rhetorical knowledge through their experience in the academic world, and they transform this knowledge into skills that help them succeed in work environments. Brent reported that although co-op students at that university only sporadically **transferred** specific practices and ideas they learned about how to write, they were able to **transform** their rhetorical knowledge of audiences and purposes for writing and apply that in their work placements (Brent 2012, p. 588-89).

Brent is also confident that students did not acquire all or even most of their rhetorical knowledge through a one-semester course in professional writing (589). Instead, he argues that “students were drawing on a repertoire of rhetorical activities in a variety of courses both within and external to their majors and also on the general experience of attending the university and having to figure out how to serve multiple rhetorical masters in reasonable ways” (589). Research I have done here at the University of Alberta in the Faculty of Arts supports Brent’s views. In surveys of all the writing assignments given to students in the Political Science department and the Community Service Learning (CSL) program, we found that students wrote

- at least one assignment in every course they took
- in a wide variety of genres—18 in Political Science, and 21 in CSL

- an average of over 3 assignments per course in Political Science and over 6 assignments per course in CSL courses
- nested or linked assignments 35% of the time in Political Science and 68% of the time in CSL

A student who took the current BA major in Political Science would have to write a minimum of 60 papers in their major courses alone, and likely much more if we count their elective courses.

The current BA programs in Political Science and CSL (and likely across the Arts) require students to write frequently and in a variety of genres. Brent's work would suggest that many of them will be able to transform, if not transfer, the knowledge they gain along the way into skills they can use beyond the BA—in graduate school, at work, and in the community. I think a reasonable question we can ask is how can we help them transform their rhetorical knowledge more quickly, more deeply, and more broadly?

Currently the Writing Across the Curriculum program offers group writing tutorials to help students writing assignments in a specific course develop their writing skills. The Centre for Writers offers one-to-one tutoring sessions, and the Writing Studies program offers courses primarily for first-year students. English and Film Studies 100-level courses also support the development of rhetorical knowledge as part of their mission (about one-third in most 100-level courses).

What is missing is a “capping exercise” or writing portfolio. These online portfolios, created by students and perhaps containing revised work from their major programs of study, would help students

- reflect on their academic work over the past several years,
- provide an opportunity to polish work that perhaps wasn't as good as it could have been when they turned it in at the end of the semester, and
- create a bridge to their future work or graduate studies
- provide a tool for assessing the work of the new BA

Portfolios of writing have the potential to prompt students to engage more deeply and critically in their BA studies.

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Brent, D. (2012). “Crossing boundaries: Co-op students relearning to write.” *College Composition and Communication*, 63, 558-592.