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Claire Edwards
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Madison Williams
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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What is Rhetoric?

7/29/2019

By Claire Edwards & Madison Williams

What *is* rhetoric?

It's a question anyone in our field has been faced with, be it by students, parents, or friends. It is the subject we have advanced degrees in, the term we spend hours discussing, the concept some of us spend our lives studying; so why is this question so hard to answer? Many of us have our go-to definitions prepared to answer this question, usually short and sweet, that seem to sum up the concept well enough. Rhetoric is "the study of effective argument, persuasion, and messaging" or "the art of successfully conveying a message for a specific audience within a specific context". Duh. While this sort of answer might suffice in the moment, we know rhetoric is more than just a persuasive argument. But, how can we possibly encompass all that rhetoric means to us in a few short words?

The root of the difficulty defining rhetoric is complicated, much like the word itself. Rhetoric has often been associated with Aristotle, politicians, and a history of institutionalized oppression but has transformed and expanded, particularly in recent years, to embrace various new perspectives. The field has moved beyond traditional views of rhetoric in academia, to appear differently depending on context, resulting in this lack of a field-wide consensus as to its definition. The uncertainty surrounding how to define rhetoric has been continuously perplexing and, especially considering the word is featured in the title of this blog, it is a vexation we've frequently encountered. Thus, as dutiful rhetoricians and members of this editorial board, we thought we'd give it the old college try and attempt to adequately define rhetoric (at least for the purpose of this blog).

The definition of rhetoric has evolved over time, from its earliest explanation as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" by Aristotle, to its interpretation as "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" by [Burke](#), to the description as "the art, practice, and study of human communication" by [Lunsford](#), and everything in between. In *Becoming Rhetorical*, [Jodie Nicotra](#) writes that "Rhetoric... refers to the wide array of communicative devices humans have at their disposal to create effects on each other" and "While it was originally developed to help people make persuasive speeches, rhetoric is still studied for its supreme practicality and adaptability" ("Introduction" 2018).

Some of these definitions might initially seem straightforward and simple enough. However, defining rhetoric becomes more complicated when one considers that intentional or not, anything with a decision made about it is rhetorical; the decision itself makes it rhetorical, and if there is thought behind it, it's in the realm of rhetoric ([Watson](#)). For example, a protest poster decrying the negative effects of a zoning bill is certainly rhetorical. But, the following things are

also rhetorical: the placement of a homeless shelter adjacent to luxury condos, the design of that shelter, the community outreach efforts to gain funds for the shelter, and the ongoing discourse surrounding the shelter and its efficacy.

These examples illustrate just how difficult rhetoric can be to define and that it means potentially very different things in different contexts. It has evolved over time in not only its definition but also its scope and application. While some might define rhetoric as the study of effective argument, persuasion, and messaging, our program and the current larger study of rhetoric asks us to return to the drawing board as the field has broadened to include matters not easily classified as argumentative or persuasive (or even intentional). What is clear though, is that rhetoric is bigger than just something we study in our program; it surrounds us in our daily lives.

So, what is rhetoric to *us*?

For our purposes in this blog, we see rhetoric as a way to examine and communicate about the various power dynamics inherent to our city. We will use rhetoric to better understand communication across contexts, as something that exists in and, perhaps more significantly, outside of the academy. Rhetoric has power; it helps us to understand power dynamics, our roles in the world, and how we might interact with and respond to the environment around us. In these attempts, we hope to support the practice and study of rhetoric as vital activities that offer insights into the languages and communities of our city.