

# A rhetorical approach to language and literacy education

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## Biography

Based for many years in Language Development Centre, Footscray College of TAFE (now Victoria University), in 1995 Rob McCormack joined Batchelor Institute, NT, an Institute for Australian Indigenous adults. Rob's primary commitment is to 'second chance education', the additional loop of education needed by most marginalised or colonised people to redress as adults the indignities and failure of their initial childhood schooling.

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*For 2300 years ancient rhetoric formed the capstone of language and literacy education in Europe. Anyone who became literate during this era became literate through a training in rhetoric. An extensive training in rhetoric was a formative experience shared by all the leading figures of Western civilisation: Cicero, Augustine, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Bacon, Milton. Thus rhetoric is almost certainly as fundamental to the definition of Western culture as Greek philosophy or Hebraic Christianity.*

However, over the last two centuries rhetoric has been largely abandoned as a framing of language and literacy education. Comprehensive schooling, by contrast, has almost entirely abandoned the rigorous traditions of rhetoric, and replaced it with forms of expressivism. It is only in the academic streams of academically oriented, so-called scholarship', secondary schools, especially private schools for the children of the ruling elites, that we still find remnants of rhetoric.

## Frameworks or Pedagogy

It is my view that the adult language and literacy frameworks developed during the 90s in Australia and globally are radically deficient. They did not emerge from observation or reflection on the milestones through which students pass, but were instead models of abstract continua constructed theoretically. (I know this from personal experience because I was deeply involved in many of them: as a key person in the rejection of the ALLAN Scales, a writer of the Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Competencies, designer of the categories underpinning the CGEA, designer of one set of –misused – categories for the NRS (National Reporting System), and as designer of a set of categories taken up by national numeracy educators.)

But there is a world of difference between the learning path that students *actually* need to traverse with quite specific difficulties and milestones, on one hand and the theoretically-derived 'outcomes' and 'performance criteria' of these Frameworks, on the other. And when teachers and learners begin to take these 'outcome statements' and 'performance criteria' as true descriptions of teaching/learning tasks, then the process of teaching and learning has been radically damaged. I believe this has already happened. It is inevitable that over time untrained or inexperienced teachers in particular 'teach to the test' and students demand that they be 'taught to the test'.

## Returning to rhetoric

For the purposes of this article we can define rhetoric as a training in persuasive speech, speech that persuades through consciously orchestrating argument (logos), emotion (pathos) and authority (ethos). The basic claim of rhetoric as 'the art of speech' is that although we can speak or write well though innate talent or under the power of the emotions of the moment, it is possible to systematically enhance our powers of speech and writing through an explicit pedagogy which studies language for its powers of persuasion, not its grammaticality or conformity with a set of underlying rules. Traditionally, grammar, the study of rules, was

taught in primary school separately and before rhetoric. Rhetoric formed the heart of secondary education. Actually rhetoric was keenly interested in the way rule-breaking can be exploited for its shock value or rhetorical effect. In fact a number of rhetorical figures consist of deliberate deviations from the normal expectations of the reader or listener.

My hope is that a return to the design principles embodied in ancient rhetoric, will mean that language and literacy pedagogy can finally emerge as a substantial and important region of adult education with a pedagogy that is sensitive and attuned to Indigenous students. A rhetorically framed pedagogy positions students as (potentially) engaged in ethically and politically responsible speech, speech that is intent on articulating differences of positions and resolving these in a larger common sense. A rhetorically framed pedagogy also enables teachers and students to identify and learn the details of language in its full effectiveness as the persuasive speech of power and passion, not just as 'correct Standard English' or as 'mainstream academic conventions'.

### **A training in leadership**

At bottom ancient rhetoric was a training for the exercise of leadership and responsibility through language not violence or weapons, which is why contemporary elite schools still embrace rhetoric. Learning to exercise leadership through the power and persuasiveness of language was the fundamental imperative of rhetoric as a form of language and literacy education. To this end, ancient rhetoric named, studied, and practiced an extensive range of devices of language ('turns' of thought, 'tropes' of language) to make speech and discourse more powerful and effective.

### **Teaching/learning strategies**

As an archive of language and literacy teaching/learning strategies, rhetoric addresses weaknesses in current approaches to language and literacy education without undermining their strengths. On the one hand even though it retains a strong focus on the relevance and engagement that motivates whole language education, this focus is filtered through a highly explicit pedagogy. Moreover the relevance of rhetoric is not merely a personal relevance, it is a rhetorical relevance, an analysis and engagement with the conflicting values and interests at issue in the communicative situation into which one must speak or act. In this sense, rhetoric continues the Friarian concern for formulating the grounds of cultural solidarity and social action in public communal speech.

### **The rhetorical situation**

On the other hand, whereas both process and Friarian approaches to literacy can neglect the specifics of language itself by a focus on social or personal meaning and context, rhetoric (like 'genre theory') is an explicit training into the forms and meaning-effects of language. However, whereas genre theory often degenerates into a decontextualised rote training in timeless generic formats and standard formulas, rhetoric retains a strong sense of context because of its focus on cultivating responsive and responsible speech that addresses the specific matters at issue in debatable and contested situations.

### **Advantages of a rhetorical approach**

So, the advantages of a rhetorical approach to language and literacy include:

- explicit attention to the meanings and effects of language at all levels, including: sounds, phrases, rhythms, word choice, sentence structure, paragraph structure, method of development, selection of content;
- explicit invocation to values, reasons and concerns defining the speech situation;
- rhetoric brings speech and writing closer together by using writing to learn the devices of rhetorical speech while framing writing itself as 'speech-like' social action;
- the categories of rhetoric also apply to other media of communication besides written text;
- rhetoric is more focused on the engaged agency of speech and writing than the distanced criticism of reading and listening, even though it provides the tools for the latter;

- rhetoric can address the demands of communication across all contexts, institutions and domains such as home, work, community, academic, civic;
- ancient rhetoric was designed to move students from local oral cultures to public text-based institutions;
- rhetoric accommodates cultural diversity whilst enjoining reasonable reconciliation and agreement as the task of public discourse;

### **Developing a contemporary rhetorical curriculum**

*CSS104 – Communication* has been re-designed to explore the contemporary possibilities of a rhetorical language and literacy education. During 2000 and 2001, I have developed teaching/learning resources that concentrate on the careful addition of explicitly defined and individually learnt text patterns (rhetorical figures). *CSS104* uses ancient European rhetoric as a model for designing the teaching/learning activities for assisting Indigenous students master the grammar and text patterns of public and academic English. *CSS104* is now very explicitly centred on teaching the demeanours and textual figures of public speaking as an exercise of responsible community leadership in which peoples are called back through public speech to grounding values and principles.

The textual figures comprise a careful selection and arrangement of ancient tropes and figures, a selection and arrangement that forms a progression in which each step makes sense on its own as a full utterance yet can also later serve as an element within a larger, more complex utterance. This is the scaffolding principle on which the *Progymnasmata* is based –one of the three defining curricula of ancient European rhetoric, a document that underpinned the education of ruling elites for 2500 years.

### **CSS102 Telling Histories**

The Semester 2 Common Unit – *CSS102 Telling Histories* – is now going to adopt a similar format to *CSS104 Communication*. This means that first year higher education students at Bachelor Institute will all have had exposure to a year-long curriculum that explicitly addresses their language and literacy skills and demeanours through carefully scaffolded sequence of activities and workbooks. If successful, this rhetorical approach to language and literacy development will constitute a new and potentially important initiative in the Australian and Indigenous contexts of literacy pedagogy, nationally and internationally.

### **Where to now?**

Clearly, there are many directions both practical and research this work on rhetoric could take up. Certainly, at some point in the future it needs to be extended into an enquiry that encompasses Indigenous rhetorics and Indigenous researchers. However, I think it best to delay this extension until more students have experienced an education in European rhetoric and thus have a detailed ground on which to reflect on its relationship with their own Indigenous forms of responsible public speech. Initial student response is encouraging in terms of both engagement and progress. There is also an emergent cadre of Indigenous tutors (and potential lecturers) with a strongly developed sense of the explicit teaching and learning tasks required for enacting the language and literacy development of Bachelor Institute students. Over time the vocabulary of rhetoric will hopefully form a shared metalanguage for describing the tasks, achievements and difficulties of language and literacy learning; a shared set of teaching/learning practice, a common sense of rhythms of activities in a workshop and so on. These shared experiences can act as a platform upon which and against which these Bachelor Institute Indigenous educators of the future can form their own language and literacy pedagogies.

### **Researching comparative rhetoric**

There is thus an opportunity here for fruitful ‘two way’ exploration and comparison with Indigenous languages, pragmatics, rhetorics, pedagogies of language, education for responsible speech (and silence!), and forms of responsible leadership through speech. If European rhetoric is construed as simply one tradition of rhetoric among others, then there is the potential to use

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it as a platform to articulate the range of Indigenous rhetorics and thereby institute a dialogue that changes both European and Indigenous traditions of rhetoric by enabling greater reflective insight into their own assumptions and conventions. This should lead to a productive 'both ways' research program grounded in the 'zone of contact' between different rhetorics, their politics and ethics of public speech, and their practices and conventions for the learning and exercise of power and solidarity through speech.