

Tips for Upcoming Writing Projects

Suggestions for defining and developing your class projects, drawing on the book *Critical Situations: A Rhetoric for Writing in Communities*, by Sharon Crowley and Michael Stancliff (NY: Pearson, 2008). All references in parentheses are to pages in this book.

Commitment:

The first step involved committing to a project. This book [*Critical Situations*] was written for writers and speakers who have a stake in their project, in other words, for people who care about the work they are doing. While writing this book we discussed examples of the most powerful communication we know and determined that there is at least one common denominator shared by all. That common factor is commitment. Communication that makes a difference...begins with committed choices made by people with a real stake in the issue at hand...many of us have been trained through years of traditional schooling to feel much more comfortable with assigned topics and predetermined formats. Because of this, it may require a bit of practice to acquire the habit of discovery, which is to say, the habit of taking responsibility for the direction of our work. (pp. 7-8)

Community:

One powerful way to get past this initial block and locate meaningful places to work is to begin investigating the issues that link us to others in the communities that are most important to us. Look carefully at the places where you live and work. What are the key issues that crop up every day for your family, friends, neighbors and coworkers?...The people in these communities will be your audience, those people you want to inform, persuade, or move to action. (8)

Rhetorical Invention:

The finding or generation of arguments is called *invention*. In Latin, this term meant “to find” or “to come upon.” Invention entails a process of searching for the arguments made available by the community who discusses an issue...Modern usages of the word “invention” suggest the creation of something that has not previously existed...The older definition that we are interested in resuscitating means nearly the opposite. In our usage, to invent is to discover all of the options for speaking and writing that are available to you in any given critical situation. These options already exist as possibilities because issues are in circulation among the communities concerned with them...We believe that writers and speakers must undertake a rigorous process of invention if they want to complete a successful project and to become a thoughtful member of the community in which their project is located. (12)

Much of the work in your project, then, will involve mapping out the social and rhetorical context of the circumstances or situation that have captured your concern. Situations are made up of contending voices, contradictory sets of information and the inevitable range of different perspectives that characterize the diverse social life of nearly any community. A rigorous process of rhetorical invention requires careful reading and researching, conversation, interviewing, taking notes, drafting arguments, and other strategies that will help you to understand the terrain in which you are working. (13)

Finding stakeholders

Rhetoric is crucial for reaching sound judgments among stakeholders. Argument or critical exchange is not good simply for winning points but for drawing out the best ideas that the members of a community as a whole can muster. We ask that you consider both functions of rhetoric as you proceed with your project. You might gain power through careful speech and writing, and you might also find common ground with other people who have a stake in the issue that is important to you. (53)

Who are the stakeholders in the situations you are most concerned about?

- 1) Make a list of as many stakeholders as you can think of in the situations that most interest you. Name stakeholder groups – organizations, local communities, institutions, professions. What does each party have to gain, and why?
- 2) Do preliminary research through internet searches and by searching recent editions of local or major national newspapers... Write down the names of high-profile spokespeople, politicians, administrators and community leaders who have expressed a position on your issue. Summarize the arguments of each, and then write your responses to each one [in your notes]. (53)
- 3) Imagine a dinner party attended by a few members of all the communities represented on your map. How would the conversation go? Would there be arguments? About what? (54)

Finding the Point of Stasis

If we are to have an argument about [an] issue, and if we don't want the argument to degenerate into shouting or angry silence or worse, we must begin by agreeing with one another about what exactly is at issue in our disagreement. Ancient rhetoricians called this point of agreement *stasis*, which means "stand." Stasis marks the place where people who disagree come together, where they rest or stand in agreement on what the controversy is about. If such agreement does not occur, people can talk right past each other, sometimes for years, without even beginning to argue—let alone reaching agreement. (61)

Determining the stasis is crucial to any argument. However, figuring out the stasis is more difficult than it may seem at first glance. Most people who are engaged in arguments want to advance their own position as quickly and forcefully as possible. And so they do not want to take the time to determine whether they are arguing the same point as other participants. This hasty approach can lead to stalemate...however. If speakers and writers do not agree on what they disagree about, argument cannot begin. (63)

Analysis

On complex issues, there are a variety of sources of agreement and disagreement. By considering the following questions, you can begin to sort out sites of agreement and disagreement.

Ancient teachers of rhetoric divided the kinds of available positions into four kinds or categories. The kinds or categories are called *conjecture*, *definition*, *value* and *policy*. The categories deal in turn with depictions or assessments of events or actions [or conditions] (*conjecture*); definitions of important terms; values raised by or inherent in an issue, such as loyalty or goodness; and considerations of what should be done or not done in a given situation (*policy*). Here are examples of the kinds, stated in their most general form:

Conjecture: Does something exist? Did an event happen? [What are the relevant facts?] If so, how can the thing or event [or fact] be characterized or described?

Definition: How can the thing or event [or relevant terms] be defined? What kind of thing or event [or fact] is it?

Value: How should the thing or event [or fact] be valued? What is its quality? Was it right or wrong? Bad or good? Happy or sad? Just or unjust?

Policy: What should we do? Should this thing or event be submitted to some formal procedure? [Should we promote change? What kind of change?] (66)

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