# Logos, Probability, and the Problem of First Year Composition Textbooks

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Though the "revival" of classical rhetoric since the nineteen-fifties is generally considered significant in the refiguring of composition studies into the intellectually rigorous discipline it is today, doubts nevertheless persist as to the importance of classical rhetoric to composition. To name but a few signs of this, C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon's *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing* seriously questions the value of ancient rhetorics to the writing of modern students. Granted that this work has in its own turn been criticized for its representation of the classical traditions, yet a survey by Gerald Nelms and Maureen Daly Goggin has also found that many scholars and teachers of writing have continued to doubt the influence of classical rhetoric on the discipline of composition.

Perhaps a most telling sign— one that would bear out the Nelms and Goggin survey—can be found in first year composition textbooks.[1]

When they present principles from classical rhetoric at all, most textbooks are misleading, particularly concerning the artistic proof logos, because in them the grounding which Aristotle gave to his discussion of logos in probable knowledge does not appear.

There may be, of course, at least two reasons for this. First, the probable underscores for Aristotle the rhetorical nature of the enthymeme, and this is a term not easily presented without some foray into informal reasoning. The potential for a writing class to be sidetracked from a focus on writing to a focus on prescriptive work in deduction can be all too great. Second, it has been accepted among some composition scholars that Aristotle's rhetoric was agonistic—that it outlines an argumentation style that would create winners and losers. This view, however, results from over-simplifying his position on rhetoric. In striking contrast, Aristotle's use of the enthymeme is meant to se-

cure agreement, to seek for common ground with an audience and lead audience and speakers to a place of common acceptance.

In what follows I do not presume to reintroduce probable rhetoric while avoiding the enthymeme. Nor do I have any interest in a reformation of our discipline, or a second "revival" for classical rhetoric. Yet it has become only too clear to me that to present logos without some discussion of the probable is to subvert the way in which this principle might intersect with, inform, and be informed by, composition Studies. In contrast, Aristotle's notion of the probable makes his rhetorical theory a rigorous influence on composition theory in at least two ways. First, through inviting the interrogation of statements of belief, value, and opinion for their implicit cultural assumptions, a practice which anticipates ideological criticism of materialist critics of the 20th century, the Aristotelian view of probable knowledge suggests a method for critical thinking. Second, Aristotle's perspective on probable knowledge, as Andrea Lunsford and Gregory Clark have noted, demonstrates a rhetoric that has tacit agreement with theories of social construction. When considered in this light, the inclusion of the probable in logos results in quite a different presentation than will emerge from a read-

ing of the proof in many current textbooks. When the artistic proof logos is presented as a tool for exploration into audience values and beliefs, that is, into probable knowledge, we are then confronted with a theory of rhetoric that will suggest some productive ways of thinking through the social nature of the act of writing.

## Aristotle, Probable Knowledge, and Ideology

The probable is discussed in the *Rhetoric* as a premise for rhetorical proofs, as noted above, and as a basis for thinking about the refutation of arguments. It is first mentioned in conjunction with the enthymeme, where Aristotle writes that "rhetoric [forms enthymemes] from things [that seem true] to people already accustomed to deliberate among themselves" (I.2.11, 12). In considering this probable condition for rhetoric, Aristotle notes that an enthymeme will fail to convince an audience either because the syllogism will be too long or because "the premises will not be agreed to or commonly believed" (I.2.13).

In I.2.13, both the enthymeme and the paradigm are shown to be derived from probable circumstances, or "things that are for the most part capable of being other than they are," where "few of the premises from which rhetorical syl-

logisms are formed are necessarily true" (I.2.14).

This emphasis on the importance of the premises of the rhetorical syllogism in finding agreement with an audience in book I of the *Rhetoric* is similar to the emphasis given the discussion in book II on admitting to conflicting possibilities in arguments. In this second context, which concerns the probability of actions and the will (II.19.18), desire and the ability to do a thing (II.19.19), and the probability of causes (II.19.24), the emphasis is placed on what an audience, based on its collective experience, will find compelling.

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It has become commonplace among some composition scholars today to hold that Aristotle's understanding of the probable, as social doxa, or opinion, represented for him a stable kind of knowledge because, it is presumed, he was writing out of a homogenous culture. Aristotle's epistemology, however, was based on contingency. This will appear more so and, indeed, more skeptical than is generally accepted if we consider the discussion in the *Analytics* where he questions whether one can know anything without qualification, or in absolute terms. "States of knowledge...," he writes in the *Analytics*, ". . . (are)

developed...from sense perception" (185). While not ruling out the possibility of innate knowledge, Aristotle does suggest that being in possession of unqualified knowledge, or "that which could not be other than it is" (111) is rare.

The epistemology which emerges from the *Analytics* is not so radically skeptical that ones sense perceptions must be doubted. Yet taken together with the discussion of the probable in the *Rhetoric*, it would nevertheless seem to suggest a generative rhetoric, as William Covino has it, one that allows the rhetor to open the very conditions of existence apparently closed by ideological constructs. It would also seem not at all antithetical to the idea that all cultures are constructed and contingent. It is, after all, just those areas of agreement among people that the rhetor looks at, those areas which concern that which can only be known with probable knowledge—what Catherine Belsey has called the "commonplace."

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford have suggested that Aristotle's view of knowledge in rhetoric is "contingent" and describes a "world...characterized and limited by change" (47). John Gage has argued that Aristotle's discussion of rhetoric and the probable as "assent,

as agreement reached when all the 'persuasives' (pisteis) have been considered, could constitute a legitimate kind of knowledge" (155). According to Gage, the enthymeme works "as the theoretical basis for inquiry into probable knowledge" (157). And James H. McBurney captures Aristotle's view of probable knowledge in the observation that the "premises which compose an enthymeme are usually nothing more than the beliefs which are used as signs and causes to secure the acceptance of other propositions" (496).

If what constitutes the premises of informal, rhetorical reasoning are beliefs, values, experiences, and even how those experiences are interpreted, then these will, as Catherine Belsey has noted, constitute ideological constructions about reality that invite investigation into their very construction, a notion that has now long enjoyed acceptance in a postmodern academy. With Belsey, most would identify the ideological in "commonplaces and truisms as well as in philosophical and religious systems" (57). Ideology is that which is "obvious," that which "discourages a full understanding of ...conditions of existence and the ways in which people are socially constituted within them..." (57).

But it is important that we connect this with Aristotle's view of probable rhetoric, for this is the point at which his theory becomes relevant to a multicultural context, one wherein rhetors might seek for common ground, assent, and agreement where none would, on the surface, appear to exist. By conducting an examination at a point where she might be found in conflict with an audience on certain points, the rhetor's ideology will become conscious, as Belsey argues, in that a complex social fabric can present a challenge to assumptions (5). This social fabric can then become available for discussion. The rhetor's search for assent, for shared knowledge, in order to lead an audience into acceptance of conclusions, will lead her to explore even conflicting ideologies for that assent.

## Aristotle and Textbooks

Most current first year textbooks ignore Aristotle's artistic proofs, and a reading of those that include some definition of the proofs will not lead to an understanding of logos or rhetorical invention as outlined above. In the latter, the limited presentation usually does not allow for any discussion of how the probable might figure into the discovery of arguments that are socially understood. Most discussions of the artistic proofs that do appear in first year texts will be relegated to the unit on argument,

and the discussion will concern definitions of the concepts, but little more. One text on argument gives an account of the mode in terms of the probable without making reference to the logos, pathos, or ethos. And even in a first year text seemingly given to theories of rhetoric, one like Gwedolyn Gong and Sam Dragga's *A Writer's Repertoire*, the terms will be presented without a consideration of Aristotle's views on the probable.

When we consider how influential first year textbooks are to a course that is taught more often than not by graduate students or adjuncts—both groups representing composition teachers whose main theory of rhetoric will be the textbooks themselves—then noting how most textbooks present the issues discussed above is significant, for it is in some way to look at classroom representations of rhetoric. It might become even more critical if we consider that many writing program administrators may decide not to include the probable in rhetoric in their teacher orientations and staff inservices on the premise that it is not useful to composition theory or to a post-process pedagogy that emphasizes social constructionism or critical peda-

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gogy. Clearly there is some need for clarification here.

In contrast, a first year course based more closely on Aristotelian principles of probability might provide us with a sufficiently practical way of understanding invention that is socially constructed. The way is opened for students to begin thinking about their writing in terms of audiences other than their own teachers, and this is perhaps a way to deepen our students' understanding of invention. Currently taught as synonymous with "prewriting" or "planning" in most texts, invention is usually treated largely as an "expressionist" concern with generating ideas and focus from the self—or else going to the library.[2] In contrast, bringing Aristotle's ideas about invention back into the picture will result in a stage of writing that is audience centered and leading toward an awareness of culture. Certainly less emphasis on an isolated, romantic self will result.

A return to an understanding of probable knowledge might also significantly influence the way we approach the research paper. I currently design individual class sessions around Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as "the art of finding the available means of persuasion in

each particular case," and I actually lead classroom discussions along these lines early in the assigning of the argumentative essay, particularly when we examine model essays for their persuasiveness. In particular, I have been bringing into the classroom a copy of a letter that then President Bush addressed to college students just before the advent of the Gulf War early in nineteen-ninety-one. First, we discuss the background to this conflict, and then we focus on the audience addressed in this piece. How, I ask, is the President thinkng about his audience? What "proofs" does he use? Key among them, the similarity Bush wants his audience to see between Sadam Huisein and Hitler, is a commonplace, and one that carries with it the connotations of the last "just war" America fought in, World War II. There is also the testimony of a soldier, someone the students' age, testifying to the rightness of fighting the war. Both of these proofs can be seen as attempts to seek agreement, to gain assent from an audience based on what is commonplace.

Following this classroom discussion, I have my students look into the cultural debates about a number of issues that in recent years have been portrayed as "liberal or conservative" and resulted in a cultural stasis. This assignment requires them to research those im-portant but all too often dreary freshman topics of gun control, free speech, and so on, in cultural terms. In the place of seeking out quotes, my students are required to look at the history and rooting of various positions on one of these issues in terms of views that are held by people.

In looking at different positions as contingent and carrying value, my students are specifically required to examine different articles for the arguments, to look at, for example, how one side represents the other side, and not simply mine them for certain "facts" or "good quotes." The "fact" and "quote" practice of many freshmen, I think, reinforces their own ideology. Instead, I want them in their research to be challenged by relevant opposing views, if only because those views, given the proper subject, can bring them to an awareness of different cultural positions that are often the result of the commonplace; indeed, this might even lead them to an awareness of what is contingent in their own positions.

Focusing attention on assumptions and beliefs as a means to gaining assent may help students find a context for their writing; it certainly encourages different forms of argument, of seeking agreement as well as writing agonistic arguments. In my classroom it can lead to a new way of understanding a topic like

the abortion debate in the United States, currently a deeply divisive and polarizing debate. Rather than learning and using an agonistic rhetoric of proofs, which is how argument will appear in textbooks, my students are engaged in an argument that seeks to understand cultural and social doxa, to examine the values and beliefs of adherents to both positions in this debate.

As with this issue, so in the others, my students are encouraged to ask why, in many arguments that have at their roots a cultural difference, are people not persuaded to certain courses of action? This way of figuring an important tradition in classical rhetoric might also make it useful to discussions of racial tensions and reconciliation, and class struggles.

Given that ideological criticism and social construction are two important theoretical perspectives at the present moment, it would seem that figuring argument in the composition classroom with its natural ties to classical rhetoric is not irrelevant but instead provides a rigorous grounding to such thinking.

My own interest in what can be a rather dry discussion when fo-cused on Aristotle's views of argument is finally what I think it may do to praxis in a classroom. When students begin to see their writing in terms of real world beliefs and values, as involved in some of the tensions they face everyday, they might begin to see their way to making writing one way of exploring the world. To the degree that Aristotle's views on the probable might inform theories of invention, these views might remain relevant to composition studies today.

### Notes

[1] Two noteworthy exceptions, one by Sharon Crowley and the other by Frank D'Angelo, present writing in the context of classical rhetoric. Though D'Angelo's text-book seems especially suited to first year composition, both texts are thorough in their approaches.

[2] I do not wish to present "Expressionist Rhetoric" in the terms of an orientation on the self, as it has been in many recent journal articles. But, as with classical rhetorical traditions, this does seem to be the way that expressionist principles are presented in textbooks.

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