

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

ADVICE

3 Questions That Can Improve Your Teaching



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By David Gooblar | JULY 22, 2019

Four years ago, when I started work as a lecturer in a rhetoric department, I knew very little about the field. My Ph.D. is in English, and I had only taught in English departments up until then. But among the handful of things I did know about teaching this subject was the concept of the rhetorical triangle.

That device has proved useful over the years — both in my classroom and in my own writing. But lately, as my career has shifted from being an instructor to helping other faculty members improve their teaching, I've been thinking about how the rhetorical triangle is a handy way to help faculty members understand some of the fundamental challenges of student-centered teaching.

The rhetorical triangle, as I tell my students at the beginning of every semester, is a lens through which you can analyze any act of communication. It's a shorthand guide that allows you to more easily break down what is happening, consciously or unconsciously, when someone speaks or writes. It's not the only way to think about communication, but it's a really useful way.

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All the idea of the rhetorical triangle does is assert that any communicative act has three main components: rhetor, audience, and purpose.

The rhetor is the person communicating. It doesn't matter if the communication is spoken, written, or delivered in semaphore. Every bit of rhetoric has at least one rhetor, and sometimes many. On the first day of class, I often show my students an image of Superman with a milk mustache and the tagline "Got Milk?" emblazoned underneath. "Who's speaking?" I ask. Well, Superman. "Who else?" Eventually, students identify a number of rhetors: the actor playing Superman, the milk producers who paid for the ad, the movie studio promoting a movie, the graphic designer who made the poster, and on and on.

There's also more than one audience. A piece of communication has intended audiences, actual audiences, and audiences that are neither, but seem possible. We tailor our communication to audience all the time, unconsciously. The voice you adopt in writing an academic paper is different from the one you use in texting. Foregrounding audience — thinking about the effect your communication will have on the particular people who will be consuming it — is a hallmark of rhetorical thinking.

And then, of course, there is purpose. Every bit of communication is designed to achieve something, whether or not you're aware of the goal. Sometimes the purpose is merely to convey information. But it's almost never as simple as that. You communicate to persuade other people to do stuff; to convince them that you are good, or cool, or smart;

to make them feel terrible about themselves; to signal your politics; to make them laugh. You usually have more than one purpose whenever you speak or write, and, of course, you may be blind to some of them.

Certainly other factors matter in communication besides the big three. Genre matters, as does the broader culture and the more specific context. But the most important questions to consider when trying to understand acts of communication: Who is speaking? Who are they speaking to? And what are they trying to achieve?

Those three questions, it turns out, are also useful for thinking about teaching. Just as my rhetoric students came to class with an unconscious understanding of how communication works but no clear sense of its rhetorical components, many instructors have an intuitive sense of how to behave at the front of a classroom but have never really given much thought to the matter of how best to teach. A good way to start thinking about your teaching is to apply those three questions, in reverse.

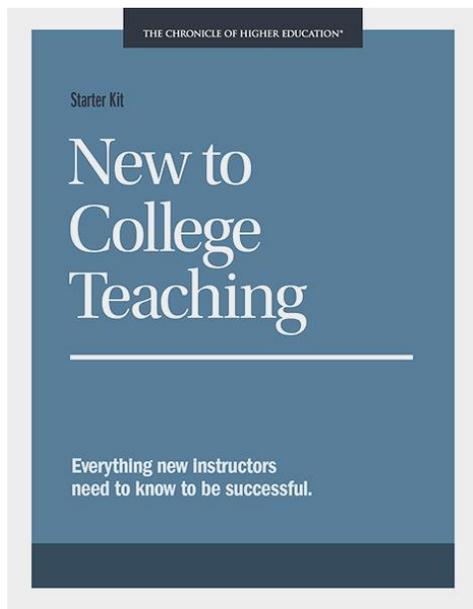
What is your purpose? That's the first thing to think about in planning a course, a particular class period, or an assignment. What do you want to achieve? Because the point of teaching is to produce learning, your purpose is always a learning outcome of some kind.

Thinkers such as L. Dee Fink, James M. Lang, and Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe have long recommended that course planning should start with an articulation of your goals for students. The concept of backward design (that Wiggins and McTighe advocate) is a purpose-driven approach: Your learning goals determine your assessments, which in turn determine what you have students do throughout the semester. Everything is guided by what you're trying to achieve ultimately.

Who is the audience? A purpose without an audience is unmoored and toothless. You can do all the planning you want, but if your purpose isn't appropriate for the particular students who show up in your classroom, you're bound to fail.

I know some instructors may be uncomfortable with referring to students collectively as an "audience." The classroom is not a theater, and we do not stand up on a stage. But keep in mind the rhetorical sense of audience: Your teaching needs to be directed toward somebody. Just as an ideal rhetorical act is one that achieves its desired effect with its particular audience, great teachers are people who help particular students learn.

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In thinking about how best to teach something, once you're clear on the purpose — and whether that purpose fits with your students' own goals — the next step is to think about what you want students to be doing to achieve those objectives. Learning is the work of

students — you can't make them learn by forcing information into their heads. What's more, who your students are — their identities and experiences, and what they want to get out of your class — heavily influences what and how they will learn in that class.

All of these factors should guide you in considering what students will actually do in your class, and whether that will line up with your purpose. Such thinking requires empathy — putting yourself in their shoes, thinking about what they might want to get out of the class and how they might feel about what you're asking them to do. That exercise need not be a shot in the dark: You can talk to your students. Ask them about their goals for the course; conduct an ongoing conversation about their successes and failures as they try to learn.

Who are you in the classroom? Think about your role as the instructor — about how you plan to create an atmosphere conducive to learning, about how your background and experience might help or hinder your purpose with this specific audience of students.

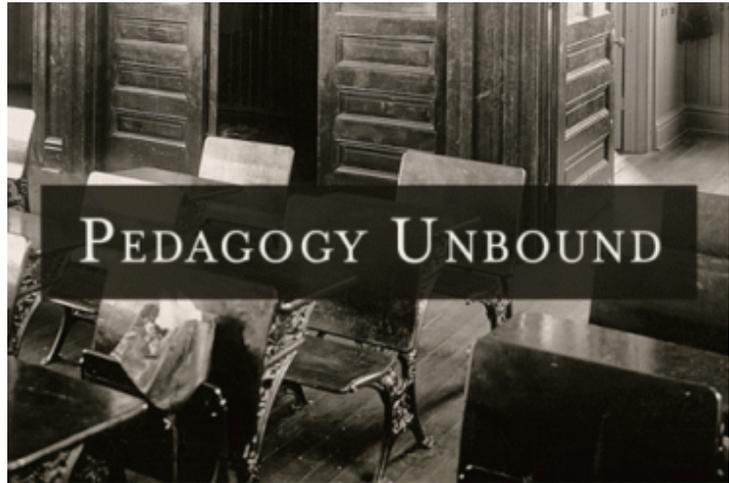
Yes, learning is their work. But your role is important, too: You create the conditions within which your students are more likely to do the work, and do it well.

Be reflective about your teaching practices. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Come up with an honest account of what worked last semester and what didn't. Strive to be honest about your limitations. Acknowledge that certain strategies and exercises are, perhaps, best left for other teachers to put into practice.

Pedagogy Unbound

Looking for inspiration on teaching or some specific strategies? David Gooblar, a lecturer in rhetoric at the University of Iowa and a blogger on teaching, writes about classroom issues in these pages. Here is a sampling of his recent columns.

- What Is 'Indoctrination'? And How Do We Avoid It in Class?
- 'Is It Ever OK to Lecture?'
- How to Help a Student in a Mental-Health Crisis



I believe that what I do in the classroom matters — just not the way I thought it did early in my career when I saw teaching as the practice of being brilliant in front of a lecture hall full of young aspirants.

Using the rhetorical triangle to analyze your teaching is not some radical strategy that will transform your pedagogy immediately. But it's a way of thinking that can help you approach an intimidatingly difficult pursuit like teaching in a more manageable way, one bite at a time. It ensures that your pedagogical decisions are based on sound reasoning, and that you never forget that you are teaching to engender learning.

If you ever find yourself thinking about designing or redesigning a course and wondering, "Where do I start?" remember the rhetorical triangle. What's your purpose? Who's your audience? And who are you?

David Gooblar, a former lecturer in the rhetoric department at the University of Iowa, is now associate director of Temple University's Center for the Advancement of Teaching. He writes about teaching for The Chronicle. His new book, The Missing Course: Everything They Never Taught You About College Teaching, will be published by Harvard University Press in August. To find more advice on teaching, browse his previous columns here.

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