

THE RHETORIC OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE

This is a course about the potential and practices of everyday people, including students, writers, and teachers, to criticize injustice, affirm commitments, and act in community with others. We will mine the American tradition of prophetic pragmatism to design an intercultural rhetorical tool kit for making a difference. And we will take local action through a Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank on the work of “caregivers.”

American Pragmatism: The Philosophical Foundations for Our Inquiry

The tradition of American philosophical pragmatism is a tradition of inquiry into differences that make a difference.

One foundation of this tradition is laid in the lives and writing of the New England transcendentalists—especially Emerson and Thoreau—in the 1850s. In 1900 William James named pragmatism as a theory of truth and an “attitude of looking away from first things, principles, “categories,” supposed necessities,; and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts (“ What Pragmatism Means,” 1907). And in the hands of John Dewey this “attitude” laid the groundwork for a new vision of progressive education, social inquiry and cultural critique. We will look at what writers, activists, and everyday people, standing in different convictional communities, operating in different fields of action, have made of this tradition—in the Civil War 1850s, in the Civil Rights 1960s, and the present.

The Four Questions We Must Answer

The rhetoric of making a difference is driven by two conflicting but complementary impulses—the move to critique and build distance and the move to connect and build community. The Concord transcendentalists helped frame this conflict as four questions each of us must answer—questions which those who followed them have answered in very different ways.

1. What form should non-conformity take?
2. What form should critique take?
3. What is the grounding of my commitment?
4. What is the nature of my connection/community with others?

The Rhetorical Tool Kit and The Field of Action

The rhetoric of making a difference is a situated rhetoric—it is a way of responding to your own time and place. It adapts to the field of action you have entered and the network of people to whom you speak. We will build our own toolkit of rhetorical moves (for critique and connection) by looking first, at the moves other people have made in different fields of action.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson in the lecture hall and journal and Henry David Thoreau in the woods
- Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in political action for civil rights & Saul Alinsky in radical action for community organizing;
- Cornel West and bell hooks as border crossing writers, professors, public intellectuals, and prophetic pragmatists;
- High school and college minority students in their course work and community projects
- College students and faculty in mentoring and inquiry with an urban community.

Then we will enter, as our own field of action, a community problem-solving dialogue—with partners in business, the community, and the university. We will be asking how inexperienced urban workers can succeed in the new culture of work and what a network of support needs to be doing. We will be using our rhetorical tools to create both a knowledge bank and a process that brings the expertise and insight of these workers into decisions that affect them.

Books for the course (available in the bookstore)

Linda Flower, *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing in College & Community*
 Cornel West, *Race Matters*
 bell hooks, *Talking Back*
 Linda Flower, Elenore Long, Lorraine Higgins, *Learning to Rival: Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry*

Other Readings (available in class)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self Reliance*
 Henry David Thoreau, “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” from *Walden*
 Walt Whitman, excerpts from “Song of Myself” and “A Patient Noiseless Spider” from *Leaves of Grass*, 1855
 Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and “I Have a Dream” speech, and segments from *Eyes on the Prize* documentary
 Saul Alinsky, From *Rules for Radicals*
 Spinosa et al, From *Disclosing New Worlds*

INQUIRIES

The writing for this course is designed as a cumulative series of inquiries. The goal of this series is to let you engage in a dialogue with the people we read and others in the class and to help you consolidate what you are learning into a progressively more elaborated rhetorical toolkit.

Inquiry #1. Critical Incident and Reflection on Making a Difference

Part 1. Write a brief autobiographical account of a time you attempted to “make a difference,” to be an agent of change, or felt the need to take a stand and act on your commitments for (and possibly with) others. These brief accounts will let us give each other a wider range of situations to think with. Use the “critical incident” strategy described on p. 340 (PSSW) to interview yourself and

get at specifics. As you tell us the story of this incident and its situation, try to reveal the thoughts and record the talk of some of the people involved.

Part 2. Write a reflection on the critical incident you wrote earlier. Use our discussion questions about convictional discourses (above) to reflect on the convictional discourse in which you were standing at that particular moment. Push your thinking with your collaborative planning partner and the class before posting on the the B-Board.

Inquiry #2. Dialogue on the Four “Questions”

Invite Emerson, Thoreau, King, Alinsky and someone(s) else of your own choosing to your table for a dialogue on the 4 Cs:

- What form should non-conformity take?
- What form should critique take?

- What is the grounding of my commitment?
- What is the nature of my connection/community with others?

What do you see as the *significant options* these writers raise for someone trying to answer these questions? (Give everyone at your table the chance to speak in this dialogue, but focus on what you see as the significant options in enough depth to really explore their meaning and rivals. Use this review of options to construct an intellectual scaffold for own inquiry by doing justice to the ideas of your guests and your own purpose in holding the conversation with them.

Inquiry #3. Articulating Your Affirmations

As you educate yourself “to live deliberately,” an important part of your tool kit is the attempt to say what you affirm, what you stand for. Hershel says “to be is to stand for; to be is to stand with.” We all already stand somewhere in the world with what philosopher Katie Cannon talks about as our “biases” when she described herself as “biased for hope, love, and action.” The flip side of these enabling affirmations is of course the restraints you put on yourself—what you won’t do. For Niebhuur the question to struggle with was, how do I contend without becoming wrongly contentious? Or when does “helping” others become “controlling” others.

Think about a specific field of action that matters to you and, being as concrete and operational as you can, try to articulate what you affirm, what you stand for not only in your attitudes but actions.

West would argue that action for freedom calls for improvisation not dogmatism, and that a statement of what I affirm is necessarily tentative, provisional, open to critical reflection and revision. So make this a first step toward articulating this understanding for yourself. Then meet with your collaborative planning partner to take the process of being articulate a step further. Then hand your draft statement in at class. Post it when you feel ready to share your thinking and invite response.

Inquiry #4. Design a Rhetorical Tool Kit

Review the rhetorical tool kit you have been developing for the task of making a difference. Look back at your papers and reading from the Transcendentalists, the Civil Rights movement, and from the contemporary cultural and rhetorical studies of West, hooks, and the rivaling researchers. Mine these rhetors for the most significant rhetorical moves, styles, stances, arguments or techniques that you see them contributing to a broadly conceived, intercultural tool kit. (Review PSSW p.375 for mining techniques.)

A Community Think Tank on Caregivers

This collaborative public project will let us test theory, develop tools for intercultural inquiry, and address a genuine problem facing working people in urban Pittsburgh.

Inquiry #5. The Rhetoric of Making a Difference for Everyday People

As we moved from reading and writing to action and writing, what has this experience added to your rhetorical tool kit of ideas, stances, and strategies? Use this final inquiry to consolidate for yourself and others your best thinking on the rhetoric of making a difference. What does it mean for everyday people? (Develop/test your ideas with concrete examples drawn from a specific field of action—considering rivals to your own best ideas.)

I encourage you to make this an “intercultural inquiry” which you can submit for publication to the Intercultural Inquiry Web Site.

Grades:

Because of the collaborative nature of this course, a grade of C or above requires that you come *prepared* to participate in/contribute to all classes and meet the deadlines of handing in and posting all Inquiries. Written work is weighted:

Inquiries # 1 and #3: 10% each

Inquiries # 2,4, 5 and the Think Tank Project: 20% each