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Gender in Rhetoric

While feminist studies flood every part of the contemporary education system, research depicting the unique strengths of both sexes has failed to gain proper exposure. As men and women are approaching equality in America, now, more than ever, it is crucial for teachers to choose a writing pedagogy that enables both boys and girls to succeed in their own mindset. The study of rhetoric and argumentative writing might seem daunting to budding teachers, a classical concept that is difficult to implement in the classroom. Students cannot succeed in their writing if it does not appeal to their individuality, and teachers are struggling to capture the interest of chaotic fifteen-year-olds. These hesitations provoke some teachers to only teach rhetoric at the level that their state requires, while others drop rhetoric entirely from their annual itinerary, leaving students ignorant of a significant life skill. By studying the differences between boys and girls in the realm of the classroom, high school teachers will uncover innovating and exciting methods of educating their students on persuasive writing. The differences between the two sexes will not be seen as oppressive, but rather, the extraordinary perspective that each has can be used to their advantage, creating graceful, dexterous rhetoricians.

Rhetorical pedagogy has existed since the days of Isocrates and Aristotle, but in contemporary classrooms, it has failed to gain the support necessary to produce successful students. Rhetoric involves the writing of an argumentative essay with a thesis or claim and strong evidence to support that perspective and/or the verbalization and oral persuasion of said claim. From an education perspective, this pedagogy helps students to understand differing

opinions, express themselves, learn advanced language, organize their thoughts, and learn speech and presentation. It can be extremely useful in the classroom, as it is a practical skill that can be used outside of the classroom, and it requires a substantial amount of practice to master, which often dissuades already too-busy teachers. Older students will be much more receptive to this pedagogy because younger students have not developed the necessary thought process to produce a well rounded argument. Any type of organizational process may be used, but New Rhetoric and Contemporary Rhetoric, which includes visual media, are a refreshing intermission to the classical format proposed by the ancients. Teaching students rhetoric gives them the ability to transform their own thought into well educated and researched ideas, a skill that will never be obsolete.

The history of gender differences is a long and brutal one that can be delineated by explaining cultural differences over time. Gender and sex, once considered identical, have become two very different ideas, with sex referring to the biological component and gender referring to the social component. “Developed in the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of gender denaturalized sexual difference, showing men and women, masculinity and femininity to be socially and culturally constructed” (Plate and Zoberman 1). With the biological aspect overlooked, men and women are theoretically capable in thinking and acting in the very same ways, only constrained by the sociological boundaries placed on them by their culture. Regardless of this, contemporary American culture has adopted the ideas and traditions of a powerful-masculine-figure and gentle-feminine-figure societal standard. English heritage, for over 2,500 years, sustained a closed mouth, body, and life requirement for women, symbolizing silence, chastity, and domestic confinement (Plate and Zoberman 2). With men carrying the dominant roles in the external environment of the business place, they developed a strong-

willed and assertive mindset that enabled them to barter and persuade in order to best provide for their family. This funneled the idea that women are more easily swayed than men, a concept that would have given a masculine advantage in tradition rhetoric.

Because women often took an internal role in society, their approach to rhetoric would involve a compassionate and metaphorical aspect, paralleling their devotion to family and housekeeping. This preference would have little to no value in a classically rhetorical environment as powerful, masculine language would repeatedly defeat the gentle thoughts of a woman. Even into the early twentieth century, men were still considered the dominant rhetoricians. Plate and Zoberman mention the *Four-Minute Men* who made a short appearance before the start of a film to persuade the audience in favor of the involvement of America in World War I (3). Women were never considered for this role because society demanded a masculine figure to use broad and authoritative statements instead of an empathetic feminine approach. These cultural traditions have led to a belief that boys dominate argumentative writing in the classroom while women are more successful at creative writing.

Boys in modern classrooms have been discouraged from writing, and are, therefore, lacking the motivation to produce any type of authoritative text. Male adolescents often take pride in a rambunctious and disruptive attitude in the classroom, basing their social status on the giggles received by their classmates. They observe the dominant masculine figures around them and copy their behavior to gain popularity. Furthermore, “they establish their masculinities by recognizing themselves as certain kinds of gendered subjects and, hence, as potentially certain types of men” (Martino 103). Younger males in particular often consider themselves to be inadequate and attempt to compensate by being extremely selective in the activities in which they participate. Martino mentions that “giving a crap” is one of the least

admirable actions committed by boys of this age group, and this easily carries over into academics (104). Students are significantly more likely to be interested in a subject they are successful in.

In a study that determined the factors that influence educational choices in secondary education, it was confirmed that when male students were encouraged to be proficient in verbal skills, they are more likely to choose a culture or society track as opposed to economics or technology (Van der Vleuten 190). Male dominated subject preferences often have strong social stigmas against a feminine subject, producing a large population of male students who are unwilling to participate in literature, even the traditionally male dominated field of rhetoric. This study continued to explain how boys with traditional gender ideology are less likely to choose a path relating to feminine subject preferences such as language and humanities (184). A preference to heterosexuality is accompanied by the desire to become the dominant male figure in the classroom which discourages male students from even attempting feminine subjects or subjects they struggle in. In fact, academic achievement in general is seen as a more feminine trait while males attempt to gain social achievement (Svenkerud et al. 718). Failure in any sense, especially in academics, is seen as weakness, a quality that scares male students away from the writing process. A teacher who shows additional bias against male students for their trend of unpreparedness only makes it more difficult to earn the respect of the student (Younger 329). A majority of teachers studied by Younger seem to think that because male students tend to be more “disruptive” or “irresponsible,” they need more attention and discipline in the classroom. This causes “the demands of the boys [to detract] from the learning opportunities of the girls” (Younger 329). When educators succumb to giving males the attention they are vying for, the girls are often left helpless, a quality that highly deters the

learning process and causes boys to be uninterested in the subject matter that is being taught. In an English classroom, an increase in male discipline may lead them to feel antipathy towards an already feminized subject, as they are publically embarrassed in front of female audience. If boys feel they cannot succeed academically or socially, all focus and effort the teacher gives to encourage the student will be lost. A gender neutral teacher-acknowledgment system is paramount for masculine encouragement in language arts.

Status is also extremely important in the classroom. Although many students are unaware of their actions, their subject preferences speak to the culturally developed gender roles instilled in every one of them. “‘The sciences’ are associated with high-status traits such as rationality and objectivity, while ‘the arts’ are associated with emotion and subjectivity” (Francis 35). Male and female students alike attempt to fit the mold presented to them by society to avoid the uncertainties and potential persecution that accompany a change in preference. For example, a male student who was successful at writing would be unlikely to share this to his social circle as his interest in a subjective and emotional topic would lower his classroom status. Similarly, a female student might be hesitant to pursue higher education in the field of science because her potential to fail in such a “high-stakes” career would be exponentially worse than failure in a feminine route. With English arguably being the most feminine subject, some males, in an attempt to hold fast to their dominant masculinity, will avoid putting in any effort whatsoever as this will void unintentional failure and will replace effort with a nonchalant attitude that is relatable to other males in the same position. Because rhetoric is often associated with language arts, some boys will still be hesitant to attempt verbal persuasion. This forces teachers to use other means of demonstration, apart from lecture and notes, to sustain the interest of rambunctious teens. By recognizing and presenting the different

aspects of rhetoric in creative and gender acknowledged activities, educators can easily convince their students that they can be successful in oral and written rhetoric alike.

There are three aspects that, when practiced, create very successful rhetoricians. These are: learning the art of oral rhetoric, choosing a subject that illustrates a relevant topic, and the composition of prose that moves the audience (Shurter 74). Oral presentations are often very daunting for students. Not only are they forced to expose themselves to their classmates and teacher, they are also generally unaware of the proper format and appropriate mannerism that should accompany a presentation. This is especially difficult for females because “boys dominate the classroom, both verbally and spatially, and teachers-both men and women-frequently engaged in an informal, laddish banter with the boys, intended perhaps to establish relationships. . . [However,] in the interactions with teachers, girls dominated the interactions” (Younger 335). Boys are often accustomed to social interaction in front of the class, while girls generally prefer one-on-one conversations with the teacher. The language necessary for public presentations becomes more natural with practice, a skill that many boys possess before learning rhetorical format. “Relying on analyses of oral classroom presentations, [researcher] Løvland distinguishes five student positions: ‘expert,’ ‘dutiful,’ ‘entertaining,’ ‘saboteur,’ and ‘aesthetic’” (Svenkerud et al. 717). Each position represents an approach that different students make while presenting, with “expert” being ideal in the classroom. This position uses appropriate language and nonverbal cues to effectively communicate a thesis or idea to the listeners; it is very rare to have more than one or two expert presenters in a class. Nonverbal cues present an entirely different, but equally important, aspect of oral rhetoric that women excel in more than men. “For males, conversation is a way of negotiating status in a group. Females, on the other hand, use conversation to negotiate closeness” (Svenkerud et al. 720).

Body language, including posture, gestures, and gaze, are more fluent to a female who attempts to create bonds and emotional connections through conversation. Boys in the classroom use gestures that are often forceful and harsh, while women use eloquent gestures that involve the listener in the presentation. While women are not as successful as men at public dialogue, they often use involved nonverbal cues that create a different style of successful presentation.

The topic choices between both men and women in the classroom is generally inconsequential in the classroom as long as the student can present a substantial argument with evidence and a professional presentation. There are, however, still differences between the two genders on this particular topic. Because males tend to have shorter presentations, their topics and evidence must be substantial in order to combat a lack of explanation (Svenkerud et al. 727). Conversely, females, who tend to have longer and more methodical presentations, often have lesser amounts of evidence and extended analyses. When studying subject preference, girls chose material that required reflection and interpretation, and males chose material that was more straightforward and easily understood (Svenkerud et al. 730). While true, gender differences are extremely minute in topic choices, especially regarding rhetorical material mentioned during class time. This is one of the few aspects of rhetorical pedagogy that is able to be taught without serious regard to gender difference, with the exception of extended analysis. Teaching some boys to explain their thoughts is a difficult process, but it is necessary to become successful rhetoricians.

Diction is also one of the most important aspects of rhetoric, both in writing and spoken language. It has the power to captivate the attention of the reader and present a tiresome argument in an original perspective; however, men and women use diction very differently. In fact, they are so different that “it is shown that automated text categorization techniques can

exploit combinations of simple lexical and syntactic features to infer the gender of the author of an unseen formal written document with approximately 80 per cent accuracy,” (Koppel, et. al. 1) only emphasizing the importance of gender specific pedagogical techniques. Researchers from this study collected a sample of over 500 non-fiction writings, written by men and women under very strict writing conditions, to determine if their use of language would differ from one another. They determined that “the male indicators were largely noun specifiers . . . whereas the female indicators were mostly negation, pronouns, and certain prepositions. Men used *that* and *one*, and women used *for*, *with*, *not*, and, *in* more frequently” (Koppel, et. al 401). In non-fiction rhetoric, women are more likely to portray their maternal side, connecting with the reader on an emotional level through intensifiers and modifiers, to help the reader see inside her mind. Men, however, are much more likely to use concrete images, such as nouns and determiners (a, the, that, these), to present their argument from a socioeconomic or factual standpoint (Ishikawa 593-595). These differences in word choice can create drastically different rhetorical products; while one appeals to evidence, the other appeals to emotion.

The aforementioned study by Koppel, et. al. was discussed by Yuka Ishikawa. The results displayed the most frequently used words for both men and women on two essays: “It is important for college students to have a part-time job” and “Smoking should be completely banned at all the restaurants in the country.” For men, the top five words were: “food,” “restaurant,” “non,” “together,” and “establishments;” and for women, the top five words were: “your,” “you,” “simply,” “everyone,” and “enough” (595-6). This further displays men’s association of topics with concrete activities and women’s attempt to include the reader in a shared sense of knowledge and self. Men express themselves to the reader through vivid images and relational activities that connect the reader with the text. Ishikawa further explained

that women, far more than men, discussed the condition of the physical body with regards to smoking, implying that women relate to a sense of humanity (598). While men's use of language focuses on the particulars, such as time and location, women use figurative language to soften the force of their writing in an attempt to show concern for their reader. Naturally, feminine teachers will relate more easily to the psychological approach while masculine teachers will associate themselves with statistical writing. It is drastically important that educators understand this and evaluate students' writing fairly, regardless of their gender specific diction choices, as both styles can be extremely persuasive.

The use of visuals in rhetoric is also highly gender specific. Traditional educators may not consider visuals to be effective; however, classical literature and art have used visual rhetoric for centuries to convince or inspire their audience, a concept that could efficiently be used in the classroom. Argumentation scholars have often debated the use of visuals because of their apparent emotional appeal. Conventionalists believe that when an individual sees a representational image with cultural or personal significance, "the viewers emotions are excited, [and] they tend to override his or her rational facilities" (Hill and Helmers 26). However, recent empirical studies have shown many flaws in the binary distaste of emotional thinking (as opposed to rational thinking) because it does not affect cognitive process and is a valid method of rational. This enables cultural images to take a massive role in contemporary rhetoric (Hill and Helmers 27). For women, these visuals aid in the remembrance and psychological development of the argument at hand. If a picture of Lady Justice is presented, the audience, especially women, could be more easily persuaded that justice is blind, and the American judicial system is in need of major reform. Alternatively, men are far more likely to use chart and graph visuals to help develop their argument and create a concrete perspective

that is not easily refuted. This style enables the audience to see deliberately altered scales that highlight “aggregate patterns linking details and non-obvious phenomena, and the systematic compilation of replicable data [that] may empirically corroborate local, tacitly felt impressions” (Mueller 196). Not only do graphical representations clarify the rhetorician’s position in a specific light, but they also aid in eliminating bias and cultural perceptions. If the argument requires a lack of societal perspective, charts and graphs would largely benefit the student; however, an emotional prospect can also be extremely useful in creating a persuasive contention. Regardless, “a good rhetor will attempt to prompt audience members to focus their attention on the specific elements that the rhetor thinks will most benefit his or her case,” (Hill and Helmer 28) a feat easily done through the use of both masculine and feminine visuals.

Modern classrooms, and more specifically, state educational standards, fail to incorporate a visual element into the study of rhetoric. Ancient societies exclusively used visual rhetoric to convince their allies or relations of particular prospects, as their culture was built on a sense of shared belonging. These low context cultures used images because of their emotional power and understood social meanings, making rhetoric a practically mute study. The classical age, however, brought about the rise of sophists who “taught their students how to display an ‘appearance’ of wisdom and virtue without ‘reality’ (Gore 3). Their teachings emphasized the use of formal language and oral presentation over visual images or even content. If the speaker was successful at presenting his contention in a professional and ostentatious manner, sophists believed there was no need to focus on content. Formal rhetoricians, such as Isocrates, were seen as “writers of oratory fond of moral sayings, inventors of figures and ornaments of speech, and a rival to poets ‘in sweetness and number’” (Gore 4). The ordinary Greek student would highly regard these experts and strive to be like them, adopting a focus on visual orals

and lovely rhetorical prose instead of the argumentative atmosphere of the sophists. The age of sophists continued to decline until the focus of argumentative writing was almost exclusively on content instead of presentation and was thus integrated into modern English schools. Because the British had a low opinion of sophists due to their disrespect of authority and skepticism, they renovated the idea of classical Greek rhetoric into the claim-counterclaim essays seen in contemporary schools. Some aspects of classical rhetoric, such as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, and an appreciation for oral presentation were also integrated; however, the emphasis remained on factual opinions and details, eliminating any aspect of “emotion” that might have been used by classical Greek poets and rhetoricians. This remains the standard style of rhetoric taught in American schools.

Differences of gender in rhetorical pedagogy are primarily left to the educator’s discretion; however, there are a few universal methods that should be accomplished for every argumentative essay or oral rhetorical practice. After the theory of argumentative writing is made clear to the student, practice and speech composition are the pinnacle of student learning (Shurter 73). Students need to practice the concepts that they have been taught; to learn through experience will be much more applicable than banking lectures and notes. Secondly, they need to be discussing topics that are both pertinent and interesting to their daily lives. This not only retains their attention spans, but it also inserts relevant discussions into a classroom that could have previously been devoted to classical literature and ancient discussions. Furthermore, teachers should limit the length of speeches or argumentative essays to a reasonable limit. “The formal, elaborate discourse is today rarely needed, but the brief pointed discussion of a single topic on which the speaker must single-shot just as straight forwardly. . . as he can, is the sort of speech that demands our study” (Shurter 75). Argumentative essays must be written in a

length that can explore all aspects of an idea without incoherent or wordy english to pollute the strength of the contentions. When verbalizing the essays, they should be kept at a length that would be practical in a public or even social setting; under ten minutes is ideal (Shurter 74). Expanding on these principles, educators must include gender specific teaching exercises that allow both male and female students to adopt divergent perspectives on the strengths of the opposite gender. For example, male students should be taught to use emotional visuals and expand their explanations through the use of descriptive and personal pronouns in addition to their natural inclinations. Likewise, females should learn to incorporate factual evidence and straightforward presentations while keeping their innate emotional perspective. This is necessary so that both boys and girls can accomplish successful rhetoric that is a combination of the strengths of both genders.

The differences in gender stem from a long line of cultural norms and values that developed each into unique and distinct rhetoricians. As women tend to be more sympathetic, their use of welcoming language, nonverbal communication, and choice of visuals often produce an emotional connection between the speaker or writer and the audience. Conversely, men who tend to be straightforward, successfully produce rhetoric that is objective, concise, and factual. Both men and women in the classroom have the potential to be wonderful rhetoricians; however, educators who use rhetorical pedagogy must be aware of the differences that arise between the genders and should be prepared to assess impartially. The qualities that arise from all types of student, regardless of gender, have the possibility of blossoming into convincing and professional arguments; however, it is the responsibility of the teacher to help them understand that.

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