

## INTRODUCTION TO RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION: TEACHING FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP IN AN URBAN CLASSROOM

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### Abstract

The article will focus on a high school introduction to rhetoric and composition (IRC) course. It will begin with a section that explains the history of IRC and its pathway for curricular adoption in an urban school district. IRC can be simplified as a pre-AP language course. However, the critical component of this particular course is its focus on issues of equity. It will continue with one teacher's reflections on how to continue to offer a necessary critical perspective despite the current political climate.

Keywords: *Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition (IRC), equity, urban education*

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“Texans reject critical race theory and other so-called ‘woke’ philosophies that maintain that one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex or that any individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive” (Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick in Agnew, 2021). This statement, made in response to the passage of Senate Bill 2202, shows a lack of understanding about what critical race theory is. SB 2022 and HB 3979 have the potential to be more bark than bite, but they are currently having Texas teachers re-evaluate what they are teaching and how they are approaching topics with students.

For far too long, only one perspective and narrative has been the predominant - if not the sole - perspective taught in American schools. This perspective aligns most closely with white dominant culture. With increasing frequency, however, teachers across the country, and in Texas specifically, aim to amplify the voices of those who have been marginalized and oppressed throughout history while providing students with mirrors and windows that represent true American history. As state legislatures across the country introduce bills that aim to curtail these important discussions, teachers need concrete strategies to continue to implement culturally responsive teaching in the classroom while aligning to new statewide mandates.

The article will focus on a high school introduction to rhetoric and composition (IRC) course. Any references to the specific classroom come directly from that teacher of record. The teacher of record is the primary author of this piece. It will begin with a section that explains the history of IRC and its pathway for curricular adoption in an urban school district. IRC can be simplified as a pre-AP language course. However, the critical component of this particular course is its focus on issues of equity. It will continue with one teacher's reflections on how to continue to offer a necessary critical perspective despite the current political climate.

### The Adoption of IRC into Core Curriculum

The charter school district of focus is located in an urban setting in Texas. It has identified their mission as increasing college access for its students, many of whom are first-generation students of color. While many school districts across the state of Texas follow a traditional model of offering English I through IV in high school, this district has adopted a different approach through the creation of the Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition class and implementation of an AP for all approach to English instruction. During their junior year, students at this district have the option of enrolling in either AP English Literature or Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition with the understanding that all students will take AP English Language and Composition during their senior year. While school districts that choose to offer English III and English IV must focus their instruction on American and British literature, further emphasizing white-dominant and Euro-centric approaches to studying the English language, the Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition class at this district allows teachers and students to read texts from diverse perspectives and explore real-world issues, all while preparing for rigorous AP instruction.

As students prepare to exit high school and enter the real world, it is essential that they have a strong foundation in rhetorical appeals in order to make compelling arguments and understand the ways in which the media, corporations, and political figures use these same strategies to convey their own messages. The Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition course at this district aligns closely to the AP English Language and Composition curriculum and focuses heavily on developing skills related to rhetorical analysis, argument, and synthesis- the three main styles of writing that students need to master on the AP exam. Through reading texts such as *We Should All Be Feminists*, *The Death of the Salesman*, and *Just Mercy*, students develop these skills while engaging in meaningful rhetorical analysis and discussion around everything from racial and gender equity, to the American Dream, to capital punishment and the school to prison pipeline. Ultimately, this curricular shift has allowed the district to focus on equity while simultaneously providing access to rigorous instruction that prepares students for post-secondary success.

### Theoretical Framework

Culturally responsive pedagogy was a theoretical framework that was most supported through the educator's work with Teach for America in the summer institutes where she has taken on numerous roles, including Content Facilitator. While initially a trainee, the educator became a trainer and ultimately applied lessons learned to her classroom in the academic year 2020-2021. She specifically committed to the inclusion of academic rigor, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness.

In IRC, students learn to critically examine and analyze rhetoric in a variety of print and digital media. As the 2020-2021 school year began, the educator's students expressed interest in learning more about the current election and the differences between both candidates. Thus, the unit on Political Rhetoric was born. In this particular lesson, students focused on identifying appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos through studying political campaign ads from both Joe Biden and Donald Trump. They identified areas of success and opportunity within campaign ads for both candidates and were able to tangibly see how the art of rhetoric is used to influence our opinions and beliefs in everyday life.

In the second unit, students were introduced to the concept of intersectionality as they read *We Should All be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozie Adiche. This particular lesson focused on helping students to identify the difference in connotation vs. denotation of the word “feminism”. After diving into the ways that cultural differences play a role in our own definitions of the word, students had the opportunity to complete a rhetorical analysis of Hillary Clinton’s “Women’s Rights are Human Rights” speech at the 1994 United Nations Convention and ended the lesson by researching an individual of their choosing who embodied intersectional feminism.

### Teacher Research and Self Study Research

Praxis, the process by which a theory is realized, is a focus for all educators. Oftentimes, educators in survival mode are not truly considering the theory that informs their teaching practices. When time does permit, however, innovative practices aligned with theory lead to transformational learning opportunities for students. In this particular example, the teacher - the teacher-researcher - is taking her background in culturally responsive teaching and applying it to the curriculum she has developed. The teacher-researcher was previously (admittedly) not very well versed in critical race theory. However, because of the controversy surrounding critical race theory in Texas, she has had to take some time to learn about the constantly evolving tenants and how these apply to her curriculum. The fact that she (and many other teachers) are learning about critical race theory this year just shows how misguided Texas’ fight against this theory truly is. Teachers are learning more about it in order to see if what they are teaching puts them at risk for disciplinary action and are finding that - quite often - any *conversation* about oppressive systems can be a potential risk.

What the teacher-researcher is doing is called teacher research (Stenhouse 1975) because this is defined as a “self-reflexive process that is systematic, critical inquiry made public” (Feldman, 1998, p. 28). The successes and the errors made in her classroom will be shared so that readers can learn and enhance their own practice. Specifically, the teacher-researcher is engaging in teacher research via self-study. This is conducted by the teacher about her own classroom practice. Loughran (2002) suggests that self-study creates a system in which the educator can reflect on their practice to identify areas of conflict. Both of these methods are rooted in constructivism (Piaget, 1972; Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) and in reflective practice (Campbell, 2003).

During the Fall of 2020, the teacher-researcher developed a unit on Political Rhetoric in response to her students’ desire to learn more about the upcoming presidential election and her observation of the need to enhance their rhetorical analysis skills when studying speeches and public addresses. Prior to starting this unit, students were introduced to the concept of rhetoric as the art of persuasion and heavily studied the three main rhetorical appeals- ethos, pathos, and logos. They analyzed rhetoric in letters and speeches by using the rhetorical triangle- a tool aimed at analyzing the audience, message, and purpose of different pieces of rhetoric. As the class began to focus specifically on political rhetoric, she knew it was important to first build context on the political landscape in America. As a result, the class studied the platforms of both the Democratic and Republican parties in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues that were important to each group and the language and rhetorical strategies they utilized to convey their messages. Once students had a baseline understanding of both party platforms, they were ready to engage in a lesson focused on analyzing the specific rhetoric used during political campaigns.

## The Role of Rhetoric in Political Campaigns

In the lesson titled “The Role of Rhetoric in Political Campaigns”, the objective was as follows: The student will be able to (SWBAT) analyze the intended audience and impact on messaging in political campaign ads. The teacher-researcher began the lesson with a Do First focused on remembering the elements of the rhetorical triangle. Students received a blank copy of the rhetorical triangle and worked in groups to fill in the different components (Speaker, Audience, Message, Historical/Social Context, Purpose, Tone, Audience). For each component students were required to list and define the element. Once students finished filling in the triangle with their groups, the class reviewed the components whole group and zoned in on the audience, their main focus for the day. The class reviewed the definition of audience and talked specifically about how to identify both the direct and indirect audience of a message and determine how the audience impacts the tone, purpose, and rhetorical strategies that a speaker uses. After the Do-First, students completed a pre-reading activity in which they defined ethos, pathos, and logos in their own words and learned about different strategies that campaign ads often use to appeal to ethos, pathos, and logos. Students took notes as the class reviewed the following rhetorical strategies in campaign ads: testimonial, plain folks, bandwagon, fear, and data. Students then worked in groups to identify hypothetical examples of each strategy and shared their examples with the class.

Once the class finished discussing the pre-reading activities, students split back into groups and watched a series of four different types of campaign ads. For each type of ad, students watched a set of videos- one from the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, and one from the Republican nominee, Donald Trump. In this lesson, students watched campaign ads on the following: Covid-19, Climate Change, Race and Equity, and Attacks on Credibility. These different topics were chosen because they were key aspects of each party platform, both candidates had ads that fit into these categories, and they were issues that the students had previously expressed interest in learning more about. As students watched each ad, they completed a chart on their handout that asked them to identify and analyze the rhetorical strategies that were utilized in the campaign, specifically focusing on how the intended audience impacted the message in each ad. First, students identified the topic of the ad, intended audience, and message. Then, they determined if the ad appealed mostly to ethos, pathos, or logos and provided evidence to support their conclusion. The teacher-researcher checked in with each group as they watched the ads and engaged in discussion, being sure to focus her probing questions on the rhetorical appeals that were used and the ways in which the ads were targeted to specific audiences. Students were able to identify examples of many of the strategies the class discussed during pre-reading such as plain folks, fear, and data. Once all students were finished watching the campaign ads and completing the charts, the class engaged in a whole group discussion about the overarching themes and rhetorical strategies in each campaign. Students were able to identify that both candidates utilized different strategies depending upon their intended audience.

### Teaching Reflections

Overall, the lesson on rhetoric in political campaigns was a success. Students were able to actively engage in the political process, deepen their understanding of both presidential candidates, and make informed, individual decisions about which platforms aligned most with their ideology and personal beliefs. They were able to do this all while honing the rhetorical analysis skills needed to be successful not only in their Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition class, but as informed global citizens.

One of the key strengths of this lesson was the fact that it provided students with an accessible gateway to studying rhetorical appeals. Terms like ethos, pathos, and logos can be intimidating at first,

but it is incredibly important for students to know that rhetoric is a part of everything we do. As the teacher-researcher discussed at the beginning of our lesson, rhetorical analysis happens every day—whether you are reading a news article, watching a TikTok, or dissecting a conversation you had with friends. No matter the form of media, teaching students how to analyze rhetorical appeals sets them up to be critical consumers of information. Doing this analysis with political campaigns in particular encourages students to be civically engaged and provides an avenue for them to develop their own opinions on important social and economic issues. Studying rhetorical appeals through the lens of campaign videos allowed students to develop a more nuanced understanding of how politicians appeal to ethos, pathos, and logos through the use of tried and true rhetorical strategies. This ultimately set them up to successfully do similar analysis on more complex political speeches and letters later in the unit.

If the teacher-researcher were to do this same lesson again, there are a few tweaks that she would make. One of the issues that she noticed during class was that many students did not have foundational knowledge of the major political parties in the United States or a nuanced understanding of how a political campaign works. This made it difficult for students to differentiate between fact and fiction in some of the campaign ads and skewed their perception of how each candidate effectively appealed to the different forms of rhetoric. If the teacher-researcher were to do it again, she would provide students with an anonymous poll at the beginning of class to gauge their understanding of the political system in the United States and provide space during the Do First to do a high-level overview of the system. Additionally, she would model analyzing rhetoric in campaign ads using examples from a previous election, such as Obama vs. McCain in 2008 or Bush vs. Gore in 2000. This would provide students with a strong example to follow when analyzing their own ads and would help them see how the intended audience directly impacts the message that is being delivered. Finally, she would adjust this lesson to be a jigsaw activity in which students become “experts” on a specific topic of campaign ads (i.e. environment, foreign policy, etc.) and teach both the topic and their analysis of the videos to the class. This would allow students more time to dig deeply into each ad and search for detailed examples of all of the rhetorical appeals, not just one or two.

### Conclusion

As the educator looked at the text of the bills re: critical race theory in the Texas legislature, she felt like a lot of what she was already doing would still be allowed. The bills focus on teaching all sides when talking about current events and she felt like “that’s just good teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and her lessons do that fairly well. The students examine multiple perspectives, encourage discourse and discussion, and respect differences in opinions.

We as educators must recognize the power of rhetoric in our daily lives and acknowledge its importance while sharing the role that it can play in shaping ours and our students’ perspectives. To do this, we must be explicit in teaching our students to be critical consumers of information. This paper has shown a particular example for teaching students to discern fact from fiction. A final call to action is to remind educators that we play an important role in promoting civic engagement in our students. Studying rhetorical appeals through political campaigns encourages our students to be engaged while also providing a platform for them to form their own opinions. With another election coming up, a recommitment to this skill is essential for our classroom teachers.

Not only does this article highlight the importance of helping students to become more civically engaged through the use of rhetorical analysis, but it also provides examples of concrete strategies that

teachers can use to implement culturally relevant lessons in their own classrooms given the current political climate. In this particular lesson students developed their foundational knowledge on political campaign ads, saw modeling and examples of how to analyze rhetoric in previous ads, and were able to become experts on a topic through the use of a Jigsaw activity. Each of these instructional moves is an example of “good teaching” and provides evidence that educators can engage in culturally relevant discussions in class while still meeting instructional standards and goals. This article will hopefully encourage other educators who are fearful in light of the current political agenda to be confident in continuing with this “good teaching”.

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