Reimagining the Rhetorical Canons for Professional Communication Pedagogy

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REIMAGINING THE RHETORICAL CANONS FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY

by

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FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY

These past treatments, categories, and classifications, particularly the systems of Greek and Roman classical rhetoric, persist. They have an enduring power and influence over our categories of thought, our systemic classifications, our vocabularies, our ways of thinking about writing, technology, and production.

- James Porter

One of the most significant challenges for professional communication educators is identifying and providing the skills students need to succeed in their careers. The rapidly evolving professional landscape complicates this identification; the skills a college student needs when she enters the program could be dramatically different from what she needs when she graduates. A crucial change in the past decade is the shift from a largely solo composing environment to one featuring distributed work, in which professional communicators “find themselves becoming "dividuals" – one part writer, one part project manager, one part programmer, one part student”; this has them involved in activities including “information sharing and community forums, project management and content management” (Spinuzzi, 2007, 273). The workplace setting has become so diverse that Jim Dubinsky (2015) has described professional communicators as “facing an identity crisis—trying to decide what defines them. Is it products (what they create)? Processes (what they do)? Where they fit in the overall scheme of the development cycle—the process of bringing products to market?” (131). How can academic programs provide the skills professional communicators need when those skills are so hard to pin down?
This challenge has led to a steady stream of research aimed at closing the gap between academic objectives and workplace needs. The last dozen years have seen several such studies appear in peer-reviewed journals, including Carliner, Qayyum, and Sanchez-Lozano (2014), Lanier (2009), Bekins and Williams (2006), Rainey, Turner, and Dayton (2005), Kim and Tolley (2004), and Whiteside (2003). And though there is no unanimity on exactly which skills employers want professional communicators to possess (project management, subject-matter knowledge, and business-operations expertise were routinely mentioned), one consistent thread runs throughout the literature: more proficiency in audience analysis.

One of the most recent of these studies was directed by Miles Kimball (2015a) and published in *Technical Communication* in May 2015. Kimball (2015a) and his team aimed to discover “what technical communication is today, how it works, and who does it, from the perspective of the people who manage technical communication practitioners in successful, highly prominent companies” (89). The study explored numerous aspects of professional communicators’ strengths and weaknesses; of particular interest to this project was “What kinds of education and training do these companies value in their technical communicators,\(^1\) both in terms of qualification for hiring and in terms of continuing professional development?” (Kimball 2015a, 90). The respondents noted a number of strengths, including the ability to communicate complex topics to a variety of audiences, especially in writing (Kimball, 2015b, 138). There were a number of weaknesses apparent from the survey results as well. Several of the participants “valued relatively traditional education credentials and

\(^1\) Given the journal in which it was published, the study’s use of “technical communicator” is understandable. The participants in the study are communications managers from companies with members on the Society for Technical Communication Advisory Board, including “Adobe, Boston Scientific, CA Technologies, Google, IBM, Madcap, and Oracle” (Kimball, 2015a, 90). While all dealing in some way with technical subjects, these companies are also much more than simply tech firms; as such, I believe their comments may be generalized to apply to “professional communication.” While I am not suggesting the problems detailed below are an exhaustive list of important issues in professional communication pedagogy, I can confidently claim these three ARE issues in professional communication.
skills, while at the same time holding basic writing skills are no longer sufficient for success in the profession” (90). The participants identified a number of specific problems with the way professional communicators are trained, but three issues emerged as themes:

- **Problem 1: Decontextualized communication**

  Almost everyone Kimball interviewed believes professional communicators can produce high-quality documents, but a number of them pointed out that these documents are sometimes too far removed from the business context in which they will ultimately be used. One manager pointed out that writers “have to understand what that customer is going through, ...how your product is involved in their daily life, and the business problems they’re trying to solve” (Kimball, 2015b, 142). Another noted that “contextualized training” is “what technical communicators need most” (Kimball, 2015b, 142). Summarizing the comments on this topic, Kimball argued that “rather than simply documenting products or writing down what engineers say they should, technical communicators need to be able to meet the needs of customers directly—and educators need to find ways to teach students how to do that” (142). Practitioner takeaways: “They felt that technical communicators were often distant from corporate strategies for satisfying customer needs” (Kimball 2015b, 135).

- **Problem 2: Overemphasis on writing**

  Professional communication is still called “professional writing” or “technical writing” by many, and the emphasis on writing is understandable: a 2004 College Board survey estimated that poor writing skills cost American corporations $3.1 billion per year. But writing is far from the only mode of communication required in
a professional setting, and many members of Kimball’s survey commented on an overemphasis on writing: “in the focus group of Round 3, one participant commented that “I think the focus on writing in the past is coming back to bite us... we have an industry of people who are writers—they want to write—this is not a collection of personality characteristics that lend themselves well to design for example” (Kimball, 2015b, 140). Asked to elaborate, the respondent noted that professional communicators often lack “content experience,” which he later defined as “Content, presentation, navigation and delivery. Presentation is form, medium, format, information design within a page for example, tables, lists ... And media. Navigation is organization, structure, access. And delivery is when, where” (Kimball, 2015b, 140).

**Problem 3: Inability to contribute to design**

Jim Dubinsky (2015), reporting on Kimball’s survey, writes about the dual role technical communicators often play as producers of traditional documentation (such as FAQs and instructions) and participants in the high-level design process. Technical communicators have long strived for inclusion in the design and development of the technology about which they write, but half of the participants in this survey believed there was a contradiction between designing and writing, largely because technical communication management “still grades or evaluates TC writers based on the number of words written” (Dubinsky, 2015, 127). The challenge for professional communicators is to show the value they bring throughout the process and that they are prepared to contribute to a “more design-oriented approach” as “part of the development cycle from Day 1” (Dubinsky, 2015, 127).
These are significant issues, and they will not be solved with a small or simple addition to or revision of professional communication pedagogy. These kinds of concerns have led to the guiding research questions for this thesis: What tool or set of tools can professional communication teachers provide their students that will help them address the needs of their profession? How can teachers prepare their students to be more complete members of their teams, producing contextualized communication, and contributing to design?

I believe these problems can be addressed with a renewed emphasis on audience analysis\(^2\) provided by updating and reintroducing the rhetorical canons—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. A knowledge of and facility with the canons will give students the skills employers require in two ways:

- they comprise a coherent process that focuses the rhetor’s attention on the audience.

  At each of the five stages, the communicator is prompted to consider the principle in terms of the existing rhetorical situation, and this deliberate focus on invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery will force a shift from the all-too-common writer-centered prose to reader-centered prose. For example, a writing process with a specific focus on style will help the communicator consider the linguistic setting in which he/she is writing, and it will be easier to tailor the text or document to the language of the audience. Each of the canons will sharpen this audience-based focus, and using the canons as a group will give the communicator a consistent, reliable process for creating reader-centered communication.

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\(^2\) My use of the phrase “audience analysis” is not intended to oversimplify the diverse recipients of professional communication by implying there is a single audience. Both internal and external audiences are complex, and a single audience analysis will rarely, if ever, be sufficient. When dealing with multiple audiences, the rhetorical challenges are certainly more complex, but gaining an understanding of the needs of those audiences will still be a vital first step. The analysis process referred to here and described in detail below will work in identifying the needs and appropriate rhetorical strategies for the multiple audiences professional communicators regularly address.
they provide a conceptual vantage point from which to manage the various stages of communication that often are dispersed throughout an organization. Too often, professional communicators are brought in toward the end of the production process to edit or wordsmith; this places them in an intellectually subservient position to those who create the ideas and compose the text. The canons provide a tool with which communicators can make a case for inclusion in the composition process much earlier, even including the innovation and design stages. Since product design has a significant effect on the rhetorical strategies that will be most effective, for instance, to sell a product, the professional communicator will be necessary at these early stages to successfully manage the creation of persuasive communication.

This thesis will argue that a pedagogical approach that includes the canons will help students develop the skills employers require. In particular, I will show how the canons will address the problems identified in Kimball’s study as follows:

- **Problem 1: Decontextualized communication**
  
The canons were originally designed as “the five logical steps in the process of producing a persuasive discourse” (Burke, 2014, 21). Persuasive discourse is necessarily contextualized—there is no persuasion without understanding and identifying with a specific audience’s values. Using the canons as a “five-part composing process” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001, 4) will help keep professional communicators focused on persuasion and, by extension, the context of their communication, including the audience, the content, and the exigence.

- **Problem 2: Overemphasis on writing**
Ancient rhetoric as a whole was about speaking; it was only much later that rhetorical scholars began addressing writing. The canons, likewise, were about oral presentation and performance; as such, they can help professional communicators develop skills outside writing. Updating the canons to include electronic modes of delivery, including a sophisticated use of mobile devices, will help professional communicators develop these new skills and understand the interplay of their various modes of rhetorical delivery.

- **Problem 3: Inability to contribute to design**
  
  Professional communication is necessarily about more than simply producing words on a page. The rhetorical nature of professional communication demands a clear understanding of the purpose of the communication; in professional settings, this is most readily achieved by having the full team engaged from the beginning of the design process. A rethinking of the rhetorical canon of invention will help professional communicators see the interplay between rhetorical invention and product design, and it will position them to play a much broader role in the full creative process.

  Providing professional communication students with this process for producing persuasive discourse will help prepare them to be active participants in the design and development of a wide range of tools and technology. The remainder of this thesis will show the value of the canons via a two-part argument. First, I will analyze recent scholarship that has updated the canons for 21st century rhetorical situations, especially as they are useful with the computer-mediated communication that dominates professional settings. This collection of scholarship
will provide detail on how the individual canons address skills required of professional communicators, especially those identified in the Kimball study.

Second, I will provide a recommendation for the use of the canons as a group by teachers and practitioners of professional communication to strengthen audience analysis. I will show how using the canons as a consistent, coherent process can make professional communicators stronger, more valuable members of their teams throughout the design and development process.

**Background: The History of the Canons**

Surviving records of the ancient rhetoric texts are somewhat spotty making it impossible to pin down the exact origin of most rhetorical principles. Rhetorical scholarship in ancient Greece was, like much philosophical and scientific thought, largely descriptive; as Corbett (1971) notes, “Rhetoric, like grammar or logic or poetics, is not an *a priori* science. Aristotle did not sit in his cubicle and dream up a set of principles for convincing other men. Rather, he observed the practice of effective orators, analysed their strategies, and from that observation and analysis codified a body of precepts to guide others in the exercise of the persuasive art” (41). Many rhetoric scholars followed a similar practice, and this led to a broad range of principles appearing in a number of ancient texts. As with any crowd-sourced movement, it is not easy to determine which ideas belong to whom.

The canons of rhetoric have a similarly mysterious origin story. There is some mention of steps similar to the canons in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, but the oldest record of them appears in Cicero’s writing. Corbett (1971) suggests that, by Cicero’s time, the canons had been around long enough to be an accepted part of standard practice: “By the time Cicero came to write his treatises on rhetoric, the study of rhetoric was divided, mainly for
pedagogical convenience, into five parts: inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, and pronuntiatio” (33). This division helped the sophists and other teachers of rhetoric provide their students with a consistent approach to producing persuasive speeches: “The speaker is supposed to produce a discourse by proceeding stepwise through the stages. Although the speaker’s specific choices in each stage of the process depend on the occasion for his (or, rarely, her) speech, the five-part process is taken to be appropriate for composing any kind of speech. All of the parts are needed to ensure a full range of appeals” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001, 4). Much of the value of the canons comes from their application as a group. They are not five principles that may or may not be useful; they are five steps that comprise a single process leading to the production of more effective persuasion.

This focus on production was a hallmark of early rhetoric. Analysis of existing texts or speeches was never a part of the curriculum for ancient rhetors; they simply needed to learn to be persuasive. As Corbett points out, rhetoric “represents a *positive* approach to the problems of writing. Students have too often been inhibited in their writing by the negative approach to composition—don’t do this, beware of that. . . it can provide the student with a set of procedures and criteria that can guide him in making strategic decisions in the composition process” (Corbett, 1971, 42-43, original emphasis). This positive approach is a vital aspect of the canons. Students, whether in Aristotle’s Peripatetic School or Utah State’s English Department, are rarely naturally gifted rhetors; persuasion is not an innate skill for most. A reliable process of the rhetorical canons is a valuable tool.

Rhetoric would remain at the forefront of communicators’ minds for more than a thousand years as a result of its inclusion alongside grammar and logic in the medieval university trivium. As rhetoric began to shift from speaking to writing, though, the situation
changed. Connors (1983) noted that the displacement of speaking with writing led to a de-emphasis of memory and delivery: “Writers, who are under different constraints than speakers, do not need the traditional mnemonic "art of memory" in order to recall their discourses, and the "art of delivery," usually associated with elocutionary histrionics and gestures, seems equally out of place among the writer's skills” (64). And though Connors conceded that delivery could apply to the ways writers present their texts, he still defended its exclusion from modern writing instruction by noting that even a well-designed document “cannot turn a poor piece of writing into a good one or make a vacuous essay meaningful. The best that the suggestions here can do is prevent a good piece of writing from being sabotaged by silly or careless physical presentation” (Connors, 1983, 73). While we might balk at the small effect given delivery, the document design limitations of typewriters certainly constrained the options of even the most creative writers.

The canons were shrunk further still by the formal emphasis of current-traditional rhetoric (CTR). Teaching writing with a focus on the lower-level, mechanical aspects of writing, CTR teachers largely ignored invention in favor of arrangement and style (Prior et al, 2007, 3). This approach too often left writing instruction as little more than memorizing grammar texts. Rhetoric had gone from a vivacious subject capable of training students to make strong, flexible, and creative arguments to exactly what Corbett (1971) had warned against: a list of “don’t do this, beware of that” (42).

The development of computer technology helped reverse this unfortunate trend. The technological limitations of typewriters were overcome, and the philosophical positions of CTR began to subside. The creative possibilities of rhetoric expanded as scholars began to think of design more broadly. Contemporary notions of writing as design can be traced to
Herbert Simon’s work in *The Sciences of the Artificial* in 1969; anything made with intention has some element of design, and rhetoric certainly qualifies. Composition scholars began making the case for writing as design with work by Kostelnick (1989), George (2002), and many others. As invention has returned, so have the possibilities for rhetorical innovation, and many scholars are rethinking and re-envisioning the canons. Andrea Lunsford (2006) has enthusiastically welcomed the return of delivery to the communication classroom. She states: “Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, however, and crescendoing in the last two decades, the arts and crafts associated with the fifth canon have moved to the center of our discipline. To view writing as an active performance—that is as an act always involving the body and performance—enriches I.A. Richards’ notion of the ‘interinanimation of words’” (170). Professional communication, like the writing Lunsford describes, is necessarily an active process that must take into account the audience and their needs; re-imagining delivery will help instill the vitality it needs.

Lunsford’s work on delivery is a small sample of the recovery of the rhetorical canons for the digital age, and I claim they can play an important role in the way we train professional communicators to meet the needs of the workplace. In the next section, I will describe some of the recent scholarship around each of the five canons to demonstrate the ways the professional communication community has updated each of the individual principles.

**The Five Canons**

**Invention**

Invention is a process of identifying arguments and discovering the available means of persuasion. For ancient rhetors, invention was largely a process of sifting through
commonplaces and reviewing texts like Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, which offered a wide range of advice, including the avoidance of trochaic meter when speaking because “the trochee is too much akin to wild dancing.” The spread of libraries helped turn invention into a more research-heavy activity, as rhetors could marshal the arguments and evidence of others in service of their persuasive endeavors.

Electronic communication has expanded the realm of invention much further; we now have many more activities and resources available during the invention process. Janice Lauer (2004) noted many of the ways computers have assisted invention, including facilitating “collaborative writing, task analysis, usability testing, audience analysis, format paths, argumentation forms, fact finding, on-site observations, and sampling procedures” (140). Invention now consists of at least three types of activities: collecting evidence, managing teams, and designing arguments. And though two of the three (collecting evidence and designing arguments) have been part of rhetoric since before communication was predominantly electronic, the pervasiveness of computers has fundamentally reshaped them all. In this section, I will describe and analyze recent professional communication scholarship that addresses the ways invention has evolved over the last two decades and the principles we need to address in our teaching.

**Collecting evidence**

Contemporary professional communicators have access to a far larger collection of sources than ever before, and this access both enriches and complicates invention. Being able to read, listen to, and interact with the world’s best minds during the invention process can add a depth to our arguments that was not previously possible, even in principle. But this
variety of sources can turn invention into a process of evaluation and management as communicators decide which resources to use and how to use them.

Professional communication scholars have conducted a number of studies on the ways communicators are dealing with this new state of affairs; many of the most revealing are case studies. Leijten et al (2014) observed an experienced professional communicator producing a document and found a complex invention process: “during the writing and design process Aiden switched 1118 times between his proposal and other sources. The sources most used by Aiden were his proposal (30% of time); other documents (26%); email (17%); project management tools, such as MS Excel and MS Project (9%); and Internet searches (4%). . . . On average, he made 305 switches per hour or 5 switches per minute” (318). Slattery (2007) found similar results in a broader study, noting that professional communicators “seem to be spending shorter amounts of time looking at more and more texts” (313). To provide a snapshot of the resource management required of professional communicators, Slattery conducted a case study of three writers in a technology firm in the Southeastern US. Watching them throughout their process of creating documentation, he discovered that even short, relatively simple documents often involve surprisingly large numbers of sources: “The process for being assigned a project, checking out the necessary files from the client company’s document management system, gathering the information necessary for making changes, and coordinating the project management and information needs with numerous project participants can yield an enormous number of texts, literally hundreds for even short projects” (Slattery, 2007, 316). The attention paid each of these sources is similarly surprising. One writer Slattery observed used 11 documents as sources
and “spent an average of 1.1 s attending to each artifact”; another used 37 sources, “averaging 0.7 s attending to each artifact” (317-318).

The volume of resources available to professional communicators presents a significant challenge in both arrangement (keeping the information organized) and memory (remembering where the right information is kept), but invention is the biggest difficulty. Producing persuasive documents requires quickly identifying which sources are reliable and which will contribute to a text’s rhetorical effectiveness. This is further complicated by the necessity of knowing what the communicator’s audience will find authoritative or reliable. Professional communication teachers must be able to provide both strategies and tactics for rapidly assessing resource reliability, including identifying the existence of peer review and evaluating research sponsors. These principles will help professional communicators handle the immense quantity of resources at their fingertips while ensuring quality in those they use to build their arguments.

Managing Teams

Professional communication is often a team effort; survey data indicate that as much as 2/3 of professional communication is collaborative (Cardon & Williams, 2015; Blythe, Lauer, & Curran, 2014). This new focus on collaboration has changed the nature of professional communicators, particularly in the invention phase. Alexander and Williams (2015) argue for “distributed invention,” which they describe as “a process involving two or more people engaging in idea-generating activities together and where, through negotiation, ideas become mutually appropriated” (32). This distributed invention will help professional communicators overcome one of the largest challenges they face as they strive to understand their audience: idiosyncratic audience analysis. Communicators almost universally overvalue
their own perspective, and they tend to believe their ideas are more general than they really are. Collaborative writing offers an immediate antidote to this trap since there are at least two communicators bringing their experiences and backgrounds to the task.

Of course, as the writing team expands, managing the contributors becomes a significant challenge. Swarts (2011) has noted that “Technical communication involves moving people as much as it involves moving information… there is the behind-the-scenes work of gathering information, collaborating, distributing labor, and gaining buy in” (274-275). Many professional documents are so large and complex as to be impossible for a single person to produce. For example, I manage the production of a policy manual that must be revised, updated, and at least partially rewritten every year. The writing involves 8-10 people each year, and the invention stage is especially difficult; I must work with each participant, reminding them what has changed, who the new audiences are, and how we need to revise. My invention, on this project, is less about gathering sources and more about the “networking, collaborating, and distributing” described by Swarts (2011, 277).

Technology is reshaping our notions of collaboration not only in the ways we manage teams but also who, and how many, are on those teams. Pigg (2014) recently reported on a case study of a professional communicator producing a blog post and found him working with an extraordinarily large writing team, many of whom he had never met. He writes with a constant eye on and incorporation of social media, and this crowdsourcing influences his work in three main ways: “as production spaces, mechanisms for monitoring change, and resources for generating content by understanding histories related to one’s content area” (78). It may be tempting to believe social media is, at best, a tangential part of the writing process, but when the writing being produced is for a specific online community, it makes
sense to make involvement in the community “central to producing new text” (Pigg, 2014, 79). Indeed, the way we envision collaborative invention is being radically reshaped by the ability to interact with interested parties via social media: “Social media facilitate activities that are deeply important to invention: accessing or creating networks of relationships, building and maintaining a presence that can interact with them, and then leveraging them toward future action” (84). In a very real way, the presence of online communities has blurred the line between collaborator and audience. Pigg’s case study offers a way to rethink invention as both collaborative writing and audience analysis through social media interactions. Incorporating this use of online tools into our professional communication classes will help prepare students for the complex writing teams and audience they will face.
Designing Arguments

Professional communication is necessarily about more than simply producing words on a page. The rhetorical nature of professional communication demands a clear understanding of the purpose of the communication in order to successfully solve the problems posed by rhetorical exigence. The idea of communication as problem-solving led Carter (2007) to draw comparisons between writing and more technological fields. Carter (2007) assigns “design” to any problem-solving activity, whether it “leads to a tangible product [such as] an airplane design, a model of a roadway, a piece of machinery… [or] the application of specialized knowledge in science or mathematics to solving problems related to the field” (405). Solving a problem requires designing a solution. If I’m tired of living outside in the cold and the rain, I need to design a structure that will keep me warm and dry. If I want to get across a river, I must design a bridge that traverses the water. And if I need to help customers effectively use a new software application, I must design a manual that clearly communicates the features. Professional communication is problem-solving, so its invention is design.

Marback (2009) notes that design is also required when problems feature evolving or unresolvable ambiguity. Simple problems can be solved in a straightforward manner, but when there are “multiple, potentially competing interests,” more effort must be put into the early stages of solution design. Borrowing a term from Horst Rittel, Marback argues professional communication contains many “wicked design problems,” which are “problems of deciding what is better when the situation is ambiguous at best” (399).

To describe invention as design is not simply to relabel it with a more scientific-sounding moniker; it is to rethink and reconsider the possibilities in this part of the
composing process. Purdy (2014) argues that “Design offers both a vocabulary for and a way of thinking about composing that is capacious and action oriented… When we adopt a design approach to writing, we underscore the value of our work in a world where writing continually takes new and varied forms” (634). “Writing” is an activity learned and performed by elementary school children, and “communicating” is something done by everyone every day. “Designing,” however, is an activity that requires thought and effort, and it implies the significance of the act of composing.

Thinking of invention as design will also reposition professional communication in the workplace, encouraging a more creative role in the design process. This approach to rhetorical invention will help communicators see the necessity of obtaining a full understanding of the topics about which they are communicating, and this understanding can only be acquired via immersion in product design. Invention demands a communicator identify the most effective rhetorical strategies for a given argument, and that process of identification will work best when the communicator has first-hand knowledge of the processes that led to the rhetorical situation. For example, if I am writing an instruction manual for a smartphone, my writing will be necessarily limited if I have never seen, held, or used the phone. I could write the manual based entirely on what I was told about the phone from its designers, but my rhetorical options would be few. If, on the other hand, I were involved in the production of the phone, had seen it tested with focus groups, and had experimented with a beta version of my own, I would be much more able to connect the phone to its intended users. I would be able to see the phone through the eyes of my audience and place the manual in its proper rhetorical context; I would be able to observe the available means of persuasion in this specific case.
Invention is not just the first rhetorical canon; it is the one that serves as the foundation for all the others. It is most closely tied to audience analysis, and it is most vital for professional communicators to thoroughly understand and be able to apply. Computer-mediated communication has transformed the ways we collect evidence, manage teams, and design arguments; our students need a conception of invention that includes these new variables.

**Arrangement**

Rhetoric has traditionally relied on linear organization (Cicero’s six-part organization, the five-paragraph essay), but modern arguments are not bound by a single path through an argument. Electronic text offers much more user control over what is experienced in what order, and this reader agency has shaped the ways arguments are received. Recent research by Foasberg (2014) has found an impatience for long arguments in electronic form. In a survey of college student reading habits, she found that, even when electronic textbooks were offered, students almost universally avoided them, citing the availability of varying user paths as a common reason. One respondent noted, “It’s like you’re reading it and the little hand’s in the air. “You must click on me! And I can take you elsewhere!” and then, that other place is, oh! Something interesting, and it takes you to a third place. By the time you realize, it’s time to go to class and you didn’t do the actual reading” (Foasberg, 2014, 717). This research suggests that certain formats and arrangements are more appropriate for certain types of documents, and the way information is presented must take into account a range of variables. Professional communicators must consider how arrangement affects and is affected by the situation in which users experience their documents. The use of electronic embellishments can enhance or distract from the rhetorical objective.
Foasberg’s study, while indicating the challenges of arranging persuasive documents in electronic format, also suggests a valuable tool for professional communicators: usability studies. Rhetorical research has shed light on the ways users prefer to experience information, and this knowledge can dramatically affect argument structure. A recent study of electronic health records revealed that “Participants navigated through information using three main patterns: (1) reviewing information artifacts in a linear sequence; (2) switching rapidly between information artifacts; and (3) reviewing multiple information artifacts simultaneously” (Thyvalikakath, 2014, 299). If professional communicators are to produce effective documents, they must understand the way their audience will experience their work; this context will help them know how to present information to maximize their readers’ preferences and attention spans.

A desire to truly shape how an audience experiences computer-mediated communication requires delving into interface design. Omar Sosa-Tzec (2014) is performing this type of research as he reinvents the Rhetorical Handbook for User Experience (UX) and User Interface (UI) designers. He reinterprets classical approaches to argument with emphasis on designerly qualities which will improve the experience, specifically through ownership of or interaction with the system. This attention to arrangement is built on how the interface persuades the user. Following “design trends” may help the designer gain trust and respect from the user—responsive design, flat design, universal design, or sustainable design—all choices of arrangement guide the user experience and have rhetorical appeal. User Interface designers can also consider bringing qualities from objects the user knows and identifies with. This type of arrangement pays particular attention to the “selection, presentation, and application of metaphors, metonymies, and other rhetorical figures that are
accorded to the archetypical user’s moral and aesthetic values” (Sosa-Tzec, 2014, 4). This type of user centered design, or arrangement, helps the professional communicator analyze, select, modify, and present information targeted toward the user’s culture and preferences. Consider the popular photo printing service by Shutterfly.com. Audience members log in, upload family photos, and then drag and drop the photos into a virtual scrapbook. The visual layout mirrors the tangible experience seamlessly. The arrangement of this interface mimics the customer experience in traditional scrapbooking and utilizes that knowledge to make the program swift and familiar.

Another example of arrangement where the user experience guides the interface is the hugely popular Tinder dating application. This app is remarkably simple: audience members upload pictures of themselves and tap in to view photos of potential dates. The app involves swiping right if the photo sparks interest, swipe left if disinterested. The functionality is
simple, swift, and entirely visual. Tinder draws an audience who cares for little more than the visual representation of a potential hook-up, and the simplicity sets this system apart from other dating programs which involve detailed personal profiles and introspective essays.

Of course the swift transfer of information arranged by Tinder is not unique to social media. Professional communication is nearly always concerned with efficiency. Advanced professional communicators demonstrate they understand the user’s need to complete a task quickly when they arrange the information in an efficient and streamlined design. Making a system easy to use conveys to the audience their needs are important and understood. A clever, creative, or unique arrangement is not often effective and can present a barrier between communicator and audience. User Experience and User Interface studies are an important part of arrangement and can help modern professional communication students predict and respond to the needs of their audience at a fundamental level.

Sosa-Tzec (2014) discusses the way communicators can gain empathy from the audience (user) through interactions with it. Professional communicators who enlist the effects of ownership and interaction can trigger emotions in the user. Visual, sound, and physical components make the user experience more pleasant, drawing them in. Professional communication students can study how to arrange computer-mediated messages in a way that harnesses these tools of arrangement.

The positive rhetorical effect of engaging the audience is already understood by many companies that offer consumer education as part of their product line. Mizuno Corporation has latched on to this idea of arrangement wherein users interact with their system. Mizuno created the My Precision Fit website (www.myprecisionfit.com/), which is a free utility that helps consumers self-analyze their biomechanics and gait, and at the end of the assessment,
Mizuno will suggest the perfect running shoe. The progression of the website is reminiscent of the closed path of scientific experiments in that it follows a process of information gathering and building. The consumer cannot leap to the end without entering their individualized data in order. This gives the sense the experiment is building to an, as yet, undetermined result. This is a fantastic example of using arrangement to engage the reader and allowing them to interact with the text and, at the same time, draw on the trusted methodology of science. At the end of the experience, users feel they have received a personalized report, gained consumer education, and can then make an informed purchase (preferably a Mizuno running shoe).

Students of professional communication who understand the effects of arrangement can better meet their audience needs. Discussing multiple user paths, modalities, and the rhetorical power of interaction will assist professional communicators in those intelligent designerly qualities that make for greater persuasion.
Style

The elocution of ancient rhetoric has evolved into a strong preference for concision and efficiency. Tied closely to the desire for user-controlled text, contemporary professional communicators must adopt a style that does not demand significant time investment from the readers. This preference is most clearly manifest in the use of social media by professional communicators: the 140-character limit on Twitter demands an extremely concise style; blog posts must convey the message in as few scrolls as possible; 20% of viewers will click away from a video in 10 seconds (1/3 of viewers leave by 30 seconds, and almost 60% by 2 minutes) (Follett, 2015). Despite the challenges associated with brevity, it defines the contemporary style of professional communicators. In fact, a recent study (Digmayer et al, 2015) found that risk communication is more effective written this way: “Instead of using information for a one-way risk communication with stakeholders (e.g., via printed information materials), communication professionals should engage in a direct dialog with citizens affected by innovative technologies… risk communicators should participate where users express their opinions – in social media applications” (8). The communication style demanded by the technology is not a barrier to understanding; indeed, it enhances the dialog. Audience is happier to receive more concise messages, and authors are more likely to successfully deliver the essential information.

Moore et al (2015) conducted a study similar to Kimball’s wherein he and four colleagues undertook an analysis of literacy practices in the professional workplace and considered the extent to which these practices were covered in graduate education. The analysis showed the wide variety of literacy practices with which professionals need to engage. The kinds of professional writing could be ‘docucentric’ or not—that is some
professions were concerned with primarily producing texts (journalists, grant writers), and other writing was in support of other professions (medical, engineering).

The findings of Moore et al (2015) are evidence that style needs greater emphasis in training professional writers. In interviews and surveys, employers affirmed that specific stylistic characteristics are fundamental to successful writing in professional domains. Comments from respondents included:

- we need to be so precise in our writing because anything we write now has the potential to be scrutinised in some legal context in the future (Medical Specialist)
- being able to write clearly and concisely is so fundamental to how successful the graduate is going to be [in the profession]” (Lawyer)
- [good writing] is just such a big part of the job now (Accountant)

Quoted in Moore et al, 2015, 18

Moore et al’s study of literacy practices in the professional workplace investigated what employers saw as the qualities that defined good writing. The results showed a high value placed on the formal and traditional aspects of writing: grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Next on the hierarchy were features related to the interactive nature of written communication. This included writing that had “a clear purpose,” was “well organized,” had “a clear layout” and was “written in a language appropriate for the reader (including the use of ‘plain English’)” (Moore et al, 2015, 26).
When discussing the writing features considered important or very important, six key themes emerged: formal accuracy, tone, purpose, structure, brevity, and de-technicalisation. They summarized these themes, noting that graduates struggled in these areas.

- **Formal accuracy**: grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. are important ends in themselves, but these skills add to corporate credibility and reputation
- **Tone**: adapting to the different types of audience is key; getting the right ‘pitch’ in difficult situations; how to be strong and firm without sounding abrupt or ill-tempered
- **Purpose**: ability to convey a clear purpose; being clear about what action is requested
- **Structure**: structuring the document in a clear and logical manner; presenting the relevant background and leading sensibly to how the audience needs to

*Figure 16: Writing features considered important or very important in the writing of new graduates*
act; developing a feel for the conventions of the field; omitting irrelevant material

- **Brevity**: ability to write briefly and concisely; considering time pressures of audience and responding with a minimalist approach

- **De-technicalisation**: capability to present one’s disciplinary expertise in an accessible form; adapting the language and vocabulary to meet internal and external audience needs

Moore et al’s and Kimball’s study revealed many of the same weaknesses. These six features are challenges for many professional communicators because they suffer from an overemphasis on writing and decontextualized communication. A series of lessons on the canon of style would encompass and address formal accuracy, tone, purpose, structure, brevity, and de-technicalisation providing technical writers with a process to address these important skills.

All of the issues noted by Moore et al concern the needs of the audience. As such, style—in professional communication—is necessarily contextualized. There is nothing inherently virtuous about brevity, but in a professional context, where time is short and attention is in deficit, concision is a requirement. Readers rarely read a complete document; they “scan, looking for information they want, and use the results of scanning to make a decision” (Redish 1989). Readers typically arrive at a document with questions; if they cannot find the answers quickly, they usually stop reading (Vaiana and McGlynn, 4, 2002). Teaching style alongside the other canons will ensure professional communicators understand their audience needs and help them better respond to the rhetorical environment in which they practice.
Memory

Perhaps none of the canons has changed as dramatically as memory. Ancient oratory demanded speakers memorize large amounts of text, but electronic data storage has fundamentally changed our relationship with information. For contemporary professional communicators, memory is now about effectively using the archive tools available; the Leijten et al (2014) case study cited above detailed a professional communicator handling 280 external sources while working on a single document. Memory is important in knowing which sources are most suitable, how to manage vast amounts of data, and when to paraphrase versus when to cut and paste.

Memory can also be an important tool for invention. Brady and Schreiber (2013) point out that memory can act as “an inventory of past events intended as heuristics—as ways to invent content anew… not rote but a collection of experiences, taken from one’s own life and used intentionally to make new ideas” (Brady & Schreiber, 2013, 347). Thus, though memorizing specific data is less necessary than it used to be, the ability to remember material and make connections can be a powerful aid for professional communicators.

The concept of collecting ideas and notes to “make new ideas” is not a modern adaptation of memory. The ancient Roman and Renaissance rhetoricians encouraged the use of commonplace books to aid in the collection process. These commonplace books were (and are today) a small personal storehouse for ideas generated throughout the course of a day. The modern professional communicator is no longer bound to a finite library – personal or otherwise—with the Internet close at hand. Experiences, data, research, stories, art, and media can be pulled from a myriad of sources.
Institutional memory is an important storehouse for information that can be useful in these contexts. Linde (2008) describes institutional memory as “invoking and retelling parts of the past for present purposes” (3), and the effective use of these historical narratives can be a significant tool for professional communicators in a variety of industries. Paharia et al (2011) have noted a distinct increase over the past two decades of what they call “underdog narratives, which highlight the company’s humble beginnings, hopes and dreams, and noble struggles against adversaries” (776). These narratives help position the company as one that has overcome challenges and is worthy of support. The institutional memory that drives these narratives (whether wholly accurate or not) becomes a strategic tool for building a contemporary argument, and selecting the best components of that institutional memory is an important skill in professional communication. Memory, then, is not about the warehouse of information, but instead an ability to discern which types of ideas and material should be invoked. Memory enables the writer to assess the abundance of options and apply the most effective and most appropriate material for the given purpose.

Memory has additional possibilities for modern professional communicators as it can also serve as an analysis of the methods a speaker uses in order for the idea to be retained in the memory of those hearing or reading the message. Memory includes the retention of material by the audience, and is therefore inextricably linked to the canons of invention and delivery. In a 2002 study titled “What Cognitive Science Tells Us about the Design of Reports for Consumers,” Mary Vaiana and Elizabeth McGlynn summarized four key dimensions to successful consumer report writing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clear Context</td>
<td>Document structure significantly affects how the reader understands and remembers information; humans rely on hierarchical structure for comprehension and memory tasks; people structure information along a continuum from general to specific; readers follow a top-down processing of details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-Friendly Text Features</td>
<td>Headings, lists, and paragraphs affect the reader’s ability to process and remember information; features of type (font, size, boldness, color) signal ideas and show relationships; type interacts with spatial cues to aid the reader; page layout along with continuous or broken text assist the reader in organizing the message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Tables and Graphs</td>
<td>Tables are the best way to show exact numerical values and small data sets; graphs are preferable in showing comparison; label graphs and tables directly; placement of text and graphics affects whether the reader uses the display</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Let users assemble information in a way that aligns with their preferences; design for people with special needs; consider the diverse nature of the audience; allow people to chose the type of data display; provide explanatory graphics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vaiana and McGlynn (2002) found comprehension and memory were aided or hindered by these key features in professional communication. Their findings contribute to a substantial body of research in cognitive neuroscience and linguistics that identify how to present information in a way that facilitates understanding and persuasion (Vaiana and McGlynn, 2002, 3-4).

When modern professional communicators address the importance of memory, it is prudent to couple it with invention. Not only is the writer capable of drawing on a personal
storehouse of material, but more important, material should be designed to align with the anticipated responses of the intended audience. Readers interpret documents, visual images, and data in light of their own knowledge and expectations (Vaiana and McGlynn, 2002). People use what cognitive psychologists have termed *schemata* or “organized packets of information stored in long-term memory, to structure information. People have *schemata* about objects, events, actions, social activities, and abstract concepts” (Vaiana and McGlynn, 2002, 5). As professional communicators enter the design stage earlier, they are more able to consider the audience and predict what schemata might be at play. In doing so, they are more likely to relay information in a way that is understood and memorable to the end user. By pairing invention and memory, the professional communicator will be more cognizant of the audience needs at an earlier stage of the process.

**Delivery**

One of the key advancements in rhetorical delivery is the ability to use visuals in both written and oral communication. Even in a field as conservative as legal rhetoric, visual design is an increasingly important part of delivery. Calling visual communication, “the new normal,” Murray (2014) points out the advantages of well-designed visuals: “Visual rhetorical devices fill a gap in communication and comprehension because they work rapidly, almost immediately, to communicate ideas, achieve the belief of the audience in the meaning and truth of the ideas communication, and thus persuade the audience of the truth and propriety of the speaker’s communication” (9).

Modality is also an important consideration in delivery, especially when writing to non-experts in one’s field. A recent report on science communication (Peters et al, 2014) noted twin trends in consumption of science news by the general public: “a trend away from
print and broadcast media towards online media, which is quite obvious and universal, and a
trend away from journalism to a variety of other sources ranging from public relations,
individual bloggers and user-generated content in social networks” (3). This contrasts starkly
with the behavior of scientists; a recent survey of neuroscientists found that 95% rely mainly
on journalistic print sources and only 19% consult blogs as an information source (Peters et
al, 2014, 3). The most effective mode of delivery depends on the intended audience and
anticipated context of the communication.

Adapting delivery to the digital age is an exciting prospect. Internet communication is
not a well-defined medium. It encompasses online discussion groups, news forums, social
networking, academic journals, virtual art galleries, live gaming, and endless shopping. Each
rhetorical situation is distinctive and discussing delivery for a social network versus a wiki
involves vastly different approaches. However, educating professional communicators on the
theory of digital delivery will help them more successfully respond to these rhetorical
complexities. Teaching them the range of delivery choices will influence their involvement
in production, design, and release of materials.

J.E. Porter (2009) has been writing about this transition of ancient delivery to modern
application. In “Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric” he proposes a framework for
digital delivery composing of five parts:

- **Body/Identity:** concerning online representations of the body, gestures, voice,
dress, and image, and questions of identity and performance and online
representations of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity

- **Distribution/Circulation:** concerning the technological publishing options
for reproducing, distributing, and circulating digital information
• **Access/Accessibility**: concerning questions about audience connectedness to Internet-based information

• **Interaction**: concerning the range and types of engagement (between people, between people and information) encouraged or allowed by digital designs

• **Economics**: concerning copyright, ownership and control of information, fair use, authorship, and the politics of information policy (208)

Porter goes on to explain how these five categories “operate heuristically and productively across multiple situations to prompt rhetorical decisions regarding production” (208). He urges professional writers to consider how their audience is likely to engage and interact with the material. For example, if the intended audience is college-age students, the material is less likely to be accessed on a full-size computer screen, but instead on a handheld device. As Kathleen Welch (1999) wrote with respect to electric rhetoric: “The fifth canon [delivery]… is now the most powerful canon of the five.” Porter proposes teaching delivery along side invention because delivery aids invention as well as improves design and writing. Delivery is crucial to audience, for it forces professional communicators to think about how they are writing, to whom, and this leads to smarter choices as writers and designers (211).

The art and craft of communication has undergone a tremendous shift in the last fifty years. Literature throughout the nineteenth century focused on textual production of the printed page. Indeed, this hid away the oral and performative aspects of delivery. However, in the last three decades, delivery has moved back into the center of the writing classroom. As Andrea Lunsford (2006) so beautifully writes, “It is as though our old reliable rhetorical triangle of writer, reader, and message is transforming itself before our eyes, moving from
three discrete angles to a shimmering, humming, dynamic set of performative relationships” (170). She goes on to say this new form of writing “advances a looser prose style, infiltrated by visual and aural components to mirror the agility and shiftiness of language filtered through and transformed by digital technologies and to allow for, indeed demand, performance” (170). And as Kimball’s study revealed, Lunsford believes students are still only marginally prepared to respond to this new form of delivery. They are not yet skilled enough to “think critically and carefully about how to deliver the knowledge they produce” (170), and she claims the domination of print-based writing is now at an end (171). Lunsford points to Jon Udell’s (2005) theory that, “Writing and editing will remain the foundation skills they always were, but we’ll increasingly combine them with speech and video.” Lunsford and her colleagues at Stanford feel so strongly about this shift, they now require a second Writing and Rhetoric course of all students. The first course focuses on rhetorical analysis, research, and argument abilities in traditional print forms. The second course builds on the skills developed in invention, arrangement, and style, to encompass delivery. Students are expected to leave the second Writing and Rhetoric course able to “identify, evaluate, and synthesize materials across a range of media and explore how to present these materials effectively” and “analyze the rhetoric of oral, visual, and multimedia documents with attention to how purpose, audience, and context help shape decisions about format, structure, and persuasive appeals,” to name a few (173). This coordinated effort by the rhetoric and writing professors in the Stanford English department provides support for the belief there is need for delivery in the professional communication curriculum. As professional communicators enter the workforce, a more firm understanding of delivery, and how it
complements invention, will help them complete tasks in digital, multimedia, and performative writing.

Lunsford (2006) and Porter (2009) appear to agree that delivery deserves a prominent place among the other canons in the instruction of modern rhetoric. Porter describes what he believes might be part of the delivery problem in modern professional communication. He writes, “What I see in too many tutorials, manuals, and workshops on web design is a degraded form of rhetoric, i.e., a reduction of the art to routinized procedures, abstracted from context, without the full comprehensive techne kind of knowledge, which includes knowledge and understanding about audiences, effects, and choices… One cannot be an effective digital writer without knowing both technical procedures and how to deploy them to achieve the desired end” (211).

Application

Each of the topics above could, of course, be treated in isolation. To be sure, many professional communication courses currently address these issues now in part and dissected form. But I believe a professional communication program with a specific emphasis on the rhetorical canons as a group will produce three distinct benefits.

First, the five canons are strongest when placed in conversation with each other. It is true that delivery, for instance, is a valuable skill on its own, but it can only be fully explored when we see its relationship to invention. The choice to deliver a message via press release, tweet, or vlog is a rhetorical one, and these (or any other) modalities will have a significant impact on the selection of the most effective rhetorical strategies. Arrangement and style have a similar relationship: an arrangement that prioritizes user interaction will call for a less formal tone in the language used. Indeed, the relationships between topics are often where
the most interesting learning happens, as suggested by scaffolded learning theory (see, for instance, Reiser, 2004, and Davis & Linn, 2000). The connections between the canons are nearly as important as the canons themselves; without a holistic approach to teaching the canons, there will be no connections to make.

Second, working with the canons as a group provides professional communicators with a reliable model to confront writing tasks. A recent study by Brady (2007) examined the ways professional communicators actually work, especially as they use the information given in university programs. She found one of the most commonly used tools were “problem-solving models”:

When Elizabeth grappled with topics so unwieldy that she needed help organizing them, she would pull out the program’s problem-solving model and use it “from top to bottom.” She reported that because of her training in the sciences, she liked to have a model to follow: “I like to know that if there’s something that I’ve tried before that works and I try it again, I probably can depend on it.” (Brady, 2007, 56).

The rhetorical canons offer a flexible yet reliable writing process that helps professional communicators tackle the broad range of rhetorical situations they face.

Finally, the canons emphasize the rhetorical context at each stage of the process. The canons stem from a time when rhetoric was necessarily contextual: the audience was in attendance, listening to the speech. Thus, each of the canons is built around constructing a piece of persuasion for a specific audience. As noted in the introduction, this ability to contextualize is too often missing in professional communicators. The canons, as a group, bring this contextualization to the fore and make professional communicators more direct and more persuasive.
The canons, like rhetoric itself, are evolving as our topics, strategies, and audiences evolve. Professional communication students are entering workplaces that are changing rapidly as well. This constant evolution makes it imperative we arm our students with a set of tools useful across the full spectrum of rhetorical situations. The five canons of rhetoric help students contribute to design, communicate in a variety of media, and contextualize their communication by putting audience analysis at the fore. We know our students need to refine these abilities; we can prepare them for the future by looking to the past.
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