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Rhetorical Analysis in Academic and Professional Discourse

Discourse in the field of education has been evolving into a conversation about learning theories: how students learn and how educators learn from their students. Many articles have been published suggesting various teaching methodology and philosophies. One of the most common and current conversations is the importance of student-centered education. Educators write on both sides of the issue. Some argue that classrooms should be entirely student-centered; students should construct their own learning while receiving minimal advising from the teacher. Others argue that student-centered education is not helpful for students who need extra guidance since they are not yet experts. By exploring articles published by Hoskinson et al., Krahenbuhl, and Yilmaz, I intend to uncover the most prevalent trends in educational rhetoric and analyze their effectiveness.

Hoskinson et al. begin their article, “Keys to a Successful Student-Centered Classroom: Three Recommendations,” by establishing the *kairos* of their argument. Their first sentence begins, “In response to recent calls for reform…” (Hoskinson et al., 2014, p. 281). They go on to explain the situation: classrooms are being called to create student-centered environments while still effectively educating students, but educators quickly return to their old ways of teaching after attempting the shift. After explaining the situation, Hoskinson et al. (2014) clearly state their purpose: “In this article, we offer three recommendations to increase your chances of success in student-centered courses” (p. 281). By providing this clarity of intention, Hoskinson et

al. (2014) avoid circumlocution, as Quintilian recommends (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012, p. 252). Finally, at the end of their introduction, Hoskinson et al. (2014) establish their goodwill with the audience by using an invented ethos. Their final sentence states, "The present paper provides our best advice for success, grounded in relevant research in teaching in higher education when possible," (Hoskinson et al., 2014, p.281). Their rhetoric meets all Aristotle's ethical requirements: "rhetors must seem to be intelligent, to be of good moral character, and to possess goodwill towards their audiences" (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012, p. 153). Essentially, Hoskinson et al.'s introduction encourages their audience to continue reading their article with a clear idea in mind of what to expect.

In the body of the article, Hoskinson et al. (2014) rely heavily on extrinsic evidence, particularly data. For only eight pages of content, they provide twenty-eight cited sources as well as twelve supplemental sources. They summarize the results of various studies in their own words while citing where their paraphrased ideas came from in order to continue building their professional ethos. Crowley and Hawhee (2012) write, "[R]hetors who wish to appear intelligent and well informed must demonstrate that they have done whatever research and contemplation is necessary to understand an issue, and they must avoid making irrelevant or trivial arguments as well" (p. 155). Hoskinson et al. (2014) accomplish this task by proving throughout the entirety of their article that they have done relevant, current research in order to strengthen their claim that teachers should try one of their three recommendations for supporting student-centered education. They also consistently write in first person to show that they have practiced these strategies they are recommending. This turns their article into a testimony as well as an argument. They have concrete examples of implementing their ideas into their own classrooms;

they explain what worked and what did not work, as well as what the process of implementing ideas looked like from start to finish.

In their conclusion, Hoskinson et al. (2014) appeal to their audience in one more way: they incorporate *pathos*. They explain,

> Although curricular resources for student-centered courses abound, each of us found the process of transforming our own courses to be unexpectedly formidable. Each of us was confident, enthusiastic, and committed to the value and worth of student-centered teaching. But along the way, each of us—and many of our colleagues—experienced doubt, discouragement, pushback from students, and scrutiny from colleagues and administrators. (Hoskinson et al., 2014, p. 288)

This appeals to their audience's sympathy by revealing the difficulties they faced while attempting to tackle teaching in this particular new way. It also reveals that they and the audience (who are most likely educators) are "in this together." This rhetorical technique allows the readers to share in communal emotions: both the passion to teach their students in the best way possible and the frustration that comes when teaching becomes difficult.

Hoskinson et al.'s argument is relatively convincing. Their establishing of *kairos* in the beginning pulls the reader in since they frame their article as a sought-out response to a real issue in education. Educators can immediately understand the importance of the argument as well as sympathize with the issue they are answering with their article. A strength of Hoskinson et al.'s article is their clarity of purpose. Their extrinsic sources are also effective, especially their personal testimony. By incorporating their own findings as educators, they provide new insight into the issue that is credible and relevant. This article could be a good source for any educators

struggling to incorporate student-centered learning. It is not exclusive to a particular generation of teachers.

Kevin S. Krahenbuhl also writes about student-centered teaching in his 2016 article, “Student-centered Education and Constructivism: Challenges, Concerns, and Clarity for Teachers.” Similar to Hoskinson et al., Krahenbuhl (2016) establishes *kairos* in the first sentence of his article: “One of the most prominent perspectives in contemporary educational discourse is that of ‘student-centered’ education” (p. 97). This reveals that his argument (that student-centered constructivist learning should be approached with caution) is in response to one of the current trends in education. He then briefly explains where the constructivist trend comes from before finishing his first paragraph by questioning the reader: “But is this ‘student-centered’ approach the right one? What impacts might it have on classroom teachers to make this the driving force of the classroom?” (Krahenbuhl, 2016, p. 97). By doing this, Krahenbuhl (2016) frames his argument by inviting his audience to question the commonplace of their field.

Krahenbuhl (2016) addresses his audience’s commonplaces, or ideologies, both explicitly and implicitly. *Commonplaces* are defined as “statements that regularly circulate within members of a community” (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012, p. 89). Krahenbuhl (2016) states one commonplace he expects his audience to have in the first sentence of his second paragraph: “All can agree that educators ought to design instruction, school policy, and other relevant educational issues through the impact that they will have on student learning first and foremost” (p. 97). By stating this commonplace within his introduction, Krahenbuhl (2016) also establishes that he is on the “same team” as his audience; he, like them, is looking out for the best interests of students. His article implies that his audience also holds the ideology that student-centered education is the best way to support students. Thus, he takes an oppositional stance to attempt to convince his

audience to be wary of constructivism rather than blindly attempting to use it in their classrooms. As he does so, he is careful to secure his goodwill by being careful not to insult his audience's intelligence while supplying relevant information to convince them to join his side of the argument (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012, p. 159).

Like Hoskinson et al., Krahenbuhl (2016) relies heavily upon extrinsic sources within the body of his argument. Within eight pages of content, Krahenbuhl cites forty references. These references are a combination of data from various studies and testimonies from other published writers in the field of education. When he references data, he explains the studies that produced the data without underestimating his audience. He also explains the published material that helped to create the learning theory of constructivism without dismissing the research that has gone into the theory. However, when he forms his argument, he clearly states the issues that are not considered by these published works because they did not arise until the theory was implemented into real classrooms. In this way, he evaluates the data by not "accept[ing] facts at face value" (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012, p. 215). He also helps his audience see these facts from his point of view.

Krahenbuhl's decision to establish *kairos* immediately and finish his introduction with questions provides a very effective foundation for his argument. He convinces his audience to sympathize with his viewpoint by ensuring that they do not feel chastised and that they begin to question their own ideologies. His understanding of commonplaces also proves to be effective. As I read this article, I found myself agreeing with his argument despite going into the article with the opposite ideology. His use of commonplaces does assist in helping his audience feel like he is on our side and that he wants the best for students and educators. Like the previous article,

his plethora of sources assists in establishing his credibility. Altogether, I found his rhetoric very convincing.

Kaya Yilmaz's 2011 article on learning theories is titled: "The Cognitive Perspective on Learning: Its Theoretical Underpinnings and Implications for Classroom Practices." Unlike Hoskinson et al. and Krahenbuhl, Yilmaz (2011) implies her article's *kairos* and does not explicitly establish it until her conclusion. At the end of her article, she writes, "New curriculum programs urge [teachers] to embrace and practice these teaching approaches that pay attention to individual differences in students' cognitive structures or previous knowledge bases in order to help students integrate new knowledge with the knowledge they already have" (Yilmaz, 2011, p. 211). She instead uses her introduction to make a bold claim: "Familiarity with subject matter is not enough for teachers to engage in effective and pedagogically meaningful instructional practices" (Yilmaz, 2011, p. 204). She then introduces the different names for the various learning theories she intends to address in her article in an impersonal manner, choosing to use an objective third-person point-of-view.

Like Hoskinson et al. and Krahenbuhl, Yilmaz (2011) references extrinsic sources throughout her article. In eight pages of content, she cites fifty references. She also uses the body of her argument to find the points of stasis where the learning theories she explores meet so she can compare them effectively. For example, she compares two strands of cognitivist theories: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development and Vygotsky's Social Cognitivism (Yilmax, 2011, p. 206-7). She includes a list of bullet points for each of these theories in order to depict how they relate to one another in various points of conflict. Finally, Yilmaz (2011) works in within the ideology that teachers should know as much as possible about how students learn. Because she writes for an audience that accepts this commonplace, for the most part, she does not put

much effort into convincing her audience that her article is important. Instead, most of her paper is devoted to simply describing various aspects of cognitive learning, breaking them down into segments to compare the elements. This strategy is efficient for getting a large amount of information across to her audience but falls short in the rhetorical strategy of establishing her goodwill. However, she does establish her ethos by demonstrating the vast amount of knowledge she holds about learning theories as well as the considerable research she has done.

Overall, Yilmaz's rhetoric accomplishes its purpose. Using the objective third-person point-of-view to report her statistics helps the article be efficient and easy to navigate. Her organization with bullet points and headers also helps with easy navigation. This article is easy to reference and pull statistics from when doing research as an educator trying to navigate different learning theories. Though she waits until the end to explicitly establish her *kairos,* the implied importance of her work seems satisfactory through the recentness of the sources she references throughout. She also appears to be very credible because of her objective writing style and considerable number of references for a relatively short article.

However, Yilmaz's bold claim in the beginning of her article may be off-putting to some educators. Her claim that knowing subject matter is not enough to make a good teacher is blunt and could be perceived as an attack to veteran teachers who are hesitant to change their practices. Since her article primarily consists of an overview of different aspects of new learning theories, veteran teachers who are being told to change may have been one of her primary audiences. Instead, I would assume that the primary audience for her article is undergrad education students (and potentially young graduate students) who do not have enough experience in the classroom to feel personally offended by her blunt arguments.

Yilmaz's accepted commonplace (that all teachers should know as much as possible about how students learn) works within this younger audience because new education programs have already tackled cognitive learning theory initiatives. This commonplace is already something they most likely accept, so the article would fit in with their frame of reference. However, the previous generation of educators may struggle with finding the relevance of this article if they do not already believe that teachers should adjust to students' learning rather than making students adjust to teachers. Yilmaz's information may be convincing through her incredible amount of scholarship, but as a rhetor, she does not appear to intentionally reach out to educators with other ideologies.

The nature of rhetoric in the field of education appears to rely upon extrinsic sources, especially studies and testimony. This makes sense; education is constantly evolving as we uncover new ways to best educate students who are different every year. Since educators work in a field of humanity, statistics without testimony are relatively useless. Unless statistics have been applied in real classrooms with real children, they remain hypotheses and observations without any real applicable purpose. As these articles point out, student-centered education and constructivism appear to be good ideas on paper based on what we know about adolescent development of knowledge; however, applying these techniques within real classroom environments proves very difficult and may not be the best way to educate this new generation of students. Therefore, it seems that using a wide range of references is necessary in this field so that we can collect as many educators' findings as possible to best help students.

Though *kairos* may be implied in this field of study (there are always new students and there will always be more ways to approach educating them), Hoskinson et al. and Krahenbuhl's decision to explicitly state their *kairos* in the beginning of their articles proved to be more

effective than Yilmaz's choice to merely imply it. They were better able to establish goodwill with their audiences and present effective arguments. This choice also helped frame their arguments as relevant and important to read. In addition to *kairos*, acknowledging relevant commonplaces also helps writers in this field make a connection with the audience. Though Krahenbuhl does this the most effectively, all the articles work within the ideology that educators should do what is best for their students at any cost. This seems like an important aspect to educational rhetoric; acknowledging commonplaces reminds the audience why these studies are important.

Altogether, the field of education has a vast supply of published research and observations that appear to rely on similar uses of rhetoric. The more resources educators draw from and the more experience they have in the classroom, the more convincing their arguments become. Most articles are written with a team mentality; they acknowledge their audience consists of educators, so they share most ideologies. The most effective rhetors reach out to their audience in a way that makes the audience feel important, heard, and supported. They also convey that they desire the best for all students, which is a requirement unique to this field of study.

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