

Re-evaluating Message, Messenger, and Medium in Connecting to
Diverse Online Classroom

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Teaching literature successfully in a collegiate environment, whether it be online or in a traditional setting, is like slowly connecting the dots of a coloring book picture in an attempt to create a coherent collage in the end of a unified vision clearly recognizable by artist and audience alike. With the evolving economic climate and the ever-changing demands of the current job market, higher education needs have risen in an area of the collegiate environment that still feels to some like newly chartered territory—the virtual classroom.

I have been teaching for various colleges and universities in the Carolinas for seven years, both in traditional classrooms and in an online setting, so when I moved to New York City two years ago with my husband's transferred job, I thought I could continue my fulltime teaching status with my North Carolina college. ~~not the case.~~ It took a year and many administrative changes within the college before a fulltime position was offered back to me, merely four days before fall semester was to begin and six online literature-based courses—~~all capped out with pre-registered students—~~were to go "live." My school's hesitation in allowing me to maintain fulltime instructor status after I moved multiple states away is understandable and not at all uncommon. Many colleges and universities are having to alter the way they offer education to their ever changing student body, and these changes also create changes in faculty training and continuing education efforts, as well as previous administrative policies that may not cater to or be able to coexist with emerging distance education demands. In short, more and more teachers and students are realizing that they can participate and succeed in an online classroom from anywhere in the world.

And so now, like so many other teachers who live in one place yet teach in another, I have become a fulltime online instructor for a

college based in North Carolina, while sitting at my desk, my kitchen table, and/or in my neighborhood Starbucks on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

How is this possible, or even successful? It has been a growing, ever-changing process, definitely. I am a high energy teacher, with personality (and often ego) that could fill a room, and I know after my first semester of teaching six courses online, I had more than a few students disappointed after having experienced me "on stage" before and now merely "online." I was distant in my distance, and I allowed the computer to buffer the spark that naturally stays lit when I am in a traditional classroom environment. So I had to do some reflecting-a-self sabbatical of sorts to enhance the somewhat flatness of the online course into an interactive virtual learning experience for my students.

Reshaping Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle

When first examining the components involved in redesigning and implementing an engaging online literature class, a great place to start is at the beginning of rhetoric's most fundamental structure—Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle. I have used his basic argument theory countless times in previous freshman composition and public speaking courses, but never had I fully considered it as an approach to my own rhetoric in the classroom until recently. While thumbing through a writing textbook in search of an example to offer a struggling student, I came across a diagram of the triangle, and curiously tried to apply it to my own teaching style and strategy. Something didn't fit. Immediately I started to wonder if perhaps it would make a better teaching tool if it were expanded to illustrate an equally important fourth point in the rhetorical situation of teaching and learning medium, and more specifically in today's technological age—the Internet. Like a school girl with a new crush, I began to doodle a 3-D triangle on a napkin to visualize how each point should equally connect. And so the inspiration of this article began with the simple altering of an age-old persuasive tool from a flat triangle to a triangular pyramid (also known as

tetrahedron) with four points, all of which "having congruent equilateral triangles for each of its faces" (Weisstein). To me, it resembled the Rubik's Pyraminx. This new model seemed to symbolize more accurately how the "faces" of student, instructor, and literature can successfully connect, or interface with each other, using the medium of technology and the Internet.

Therefore, the goal of this discussion is to re-address the connection between the points of Aristotle's rhetorical triangle when teaching literature in a virtual environment—message (literature), audience (students), speaker (Instructor) and the newly added point of medium (technology). While this restructured approach may seem unnecessary or irrelevant in traditional classrooms (though a valid argument could be made that online components are also creeping their way into traditional classrooms as well, and therefore deserve recognition regardless), in an online classroom, since students are rarely if ever face-to-face with each other or the professor, their computer screens and course website become their sole physical contact, and for that reason alone, the Internet as medium has earned its rightful place in modern rhetoric on Aristotle's triangle.

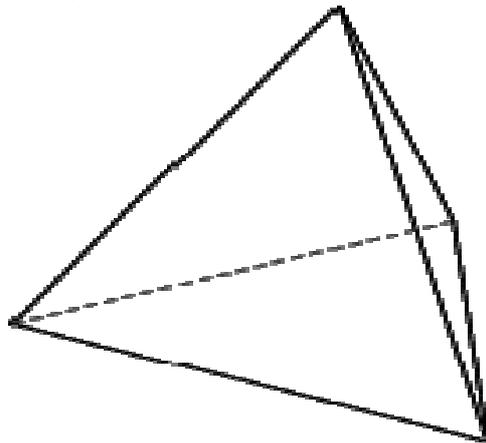


Figure 1-Reshaping the Rhetorical Triangle to become a Triangular Pyramid (tetrahedron) with four equal points is helpful in recognizing medium and method as an equally important component in an online learning environment. The altered Rhetorical Pyramid includes 1. audience (diverse students), 2.

message (literature), 3. medium/delivery method (Internet), and 4. speaker/writer (instructor or online facilitator).

After comparing the new triangle to my own course planning, I realized that in order to help my students relate to the literature I was teaching (and all my courses were literature-related: introduction to lit, literature-based research, and creative writing), I needed to play my own game of dot-to-dot by making literary connections through time (classical to contemporary choices), genre (poetry, drama, fiction, and essays), and culturally diverse writers, using texts and themes that my range of students could relate to. The challenge, of course, was engaging them through the Internet. The other was acknowledging that in the end, I (as speaker/instructor on the triangle) didn't really matter as much anymore. In an online environment, teachers are, after all, just the messenger, or facilitator, and must understand they are no longer the star of the show. With that said, we are however the director, the producer, the script writer, the editor, and even the behind the scenes grip. The success of the entire semester-long production is up to us, and so though I was just a small credit on the "faculty" course button page with a poorly-taken Facebook photo to match a scantily written biography, this epiphany helped me realize that I needed to re-evaluate my classroom approach by refocusing the core parts that really mattered in an online classroom environment, beginning with the most important—the students.

Using Pathos to Evaluate, Address, and Inspire a Diversified Audience

The first thing to consider when planning an online course (or any course) is the audience, and the core observation that seemed to matter the most in my reassessment was that my online student population had become more and more diverse over the past several years. While community colleges by nature cater to nontraditional students, in the past, these students have typically been easily identified as older, mature fulltime employees and often parents who

are seeking career changes or advancements. However, this group of nontraditional students has greatly grown and evolved in recent times. In my classrooms alone in the past two years, I've had a significant number of students who speak English as a second or third language, which brings an entirely new level of diversity into the classroom, along with the already existing differences in age, gender, economics, geography, culture, and education, just to name a few. With cultural differences alone comes varying and sometimes conflicting views of politics, religion, and societal norms that all can affect students' understandings not only of me, but of selected texts, and of each other. In addition, sometimes age and education diversity brings limited computer and Internet knowledge and availability, as well as inexperience in research methods and sometimes even limited resources available at home.

All of these differences should be considered when addressing and connecting to students in an online environment. And so the selection of course materials, curriculum, and even assignments should take the student's preferences to heart, striving to always be in the best interest of the student's ability to understand, connect with, and experience the literature. And in response to teachers and administrators who may wonder what the true benefits are in offering a culturally diverse curriculum and instruction to students, here are just a few positive outcomes, as outlined in the article "Enhancing Instruction to Connect to Diverse Audiences":

Developing teaching strategies that take into account cultural diversity will:

- Increase student participation by illustrating that the material taught was valuable and meaningful to them.
- Enhance learning of the subjects taught.
- Increase student interest in a topic.
- Show respect for students' culture.

- Demonstrate a true commitment to education and respect for the culture by taking the emphasis away from the educator (what the educator likes to do, his/her preferences) and focusing on what will enhance learning.
- Illustrate commitment to planning curriculums for an evolving diverse audience.
- Take cultural diversity from an occasional thought to a natural, ongoing part of the education process. (Guion)

All teachers should therefore ask themselves these fundamental questions when considering their students, as supported by the audience-pathos appeal on the rhetorical triangle –*How can I make students open to my message? How can I appeal to my students' interests and values? How can I best engage my students' imaginations and curiosities?* The answer is simple and complicated all at once – focus on the literature selection and the method in which it is delivered to students.

Selecting Literature that Logically and Emotionally Fits the Audience

While recognizing the vast differences in audience in an online classroom, a teacher must find ways to highlight the student's similarities through the experience of the literature. That is, after all, why we study and appreciate literature – to make connections through human experience across time, place, and culture.

Selecting just the right cocktail of literature is essential to the success of the class and the heightened experience of the student and depending on the classroom demographics, the literature should be as diverse as possible, based on past and present culturally diverse writers, in various styles, forms, and themes. Diversifying your curriculum readings can be done for any literature introduction course, creative writing course, or literature-research based course.

Another idea is to choose a few pieces that you as instructor are not familiar with. While this is a scary idea, in the past, I have often

chosen pieces I knew absolutely nothing about and experienced the literature with my students for the first time. Of course, reading and offering various criticism on these pieces is also helpful in assisting your students in moving from initial reactions to connection, understanding, and analysis, choosing obscure and off-the-beaten path pieces here and there in an online literature course offers students some fresh material and the instructor the chance to wear the student's hat for bit, to remember what it's like from a student's perspective what it feels like to experience the literature for the first time, and connect to it initially, when it's raw and before it's molded (and sometimes tainted) by canonized criticism and instructor-led agendas.

However, choosing the right combination of readings can be daunting. One of the most comprehensive yet practical lists of questions to ask when considering what literature to select was published by a University of Florida professor in 2008 as part of a series of articles about designing and implementing culturally relevant education programs. According to UF Professor Julie A. Guion, Ed.D., an instructor should carefully consider these questions "before choosing any curriculum or educational resource for a specific group":

1. Is the content accurate and research-based?
2. Is the material written at a reading level appropriate for the audience?
3. Are the applications and activities appropriate for the needs of the audience?
4. Does the curriculum cover issues/topics on the subjects that are important to the audience?
5. Does it provide interesting application exercises for applying the ideas?
6. Are the examples relevant to the life experiences of the audience?
7. Does the content reflect the norms, values, and preferences of the target audience and avoid negative stereotyping?

8. When related to the subject content, are the cultural observances acknowledged and/or celebrated?
9. Does the curriculum involve users as partners in applying the principles taught in the lessons to their lives? (Guion)

But answering these questions is only the first step. While understanding that cultural relevance of course materials is key to teaching a literature course to a diverse audience, with the wealth of materials available, at times choosing texts may seem overwhelming for even the most seasoned and well-read professor. So here is a short list of short readings (fiction, essays, and poetry) with connecting themes from various time periods that may help better illustrate this idea and offer some inspiration and direction (all texts and author biographies can be found in Frank Madden's *Exploring Literature*, 3rd edition anthology):

25 Literary Texts* to Consider in Connecting to Students of Varying Ages, Cultures, Economic Backgrounds, Geographies, Religions, and Experiences

Literature Title	Author	Text Date	Theme(s)
"Cathedral"	<u>Raymond Carver</u> From Oregon and Washington	1984	Faith and doubt Stereotypes Women and Men
"Digging"	<u>Seamus Heaney</u> Born in County Derry, Northern Ireland	1965	Family and Friends
"Immigrants"	<u>Pat Mora</u> From El Paso, Texas	1986	Culture and Identity Societal Norms
<i>Trifles</i>	<u>Susan Glaspell</u> Born in Iowa	1916	Women and Men Societal Norms
<i>The Things they Carried (excerpts from)</i>	<u>Tim O'Brien</u> From Minnesota; served two years in Vietnam War	1990	Faith and Doubt Perception vs. Reality War
"Desiree's Baby"	<u>Kate Chopin</u> Father was an Irish immigrant	1892	Culture and Identity Racism
"Latin Night at	<u>Martin Espada</u>	1987	Culture and Identity

the Pawn Shop"	Of Puerto Rican ancestry		
"Workers"	<u>Richard Rodriguez</u> Son of Mexican immigrants	1982	Culture and Identity
"Araby"	<u>James Joyce</u> Raised in Dublin, Ireland	1914	Innocence and Experience
"A Good Man is Hard to Find"	<u>Flannery O'Connor</u> Born in Savannah, Georgia	1955	Faith and Doubt Family Relations
"Hills like White Elephants"	<u>Ernest Hemmingway</u> Born in Illinois, active in WWI, WWII, and Spanish Civil War	1927	Men and Women Morality
"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings"	<u>Gabriel Garcia Marquez</u> Born in Aracataca, Columbia	1955	Culture and Identity Perception vs. reality
"The Lake Isle of Innisfree"	<u>William Butler Yeats</u> Born in Dublin, Ireland	1893	Identity Escape and Refuge
"Everyday Use"	<u>Alice Walker</u> Southern African American	1983	Culture and Identity Family Heritage Mother-Daughter Relations
"Brave We Are"	<u>Tahira Naqvi</u> Originally from Pakistan	2001	Culture and Identity Family Heritage
"Young Goodman Brown"	<u>Nathaniel Hawthorne</u> Born in Salem, MA to Puritan family; ancestor served as judge in Salem Witch trials	1828	Faith and Doubt Societal Norms Perception vs. Reality
"A&P"	<u>John Updike</u> Born in Pennsylvania; studied art in England and worked as journalist for the New Yorker	1962	Innocence and Experience
"Salvation"	<u>Langston Hughes</u> One of the most important figures of	1940	Culture and Identity Faith and Doubt Innocence and

	the Harlem Renaissance		Experience
"Mother Tongue"	<u>Amy Tan</u> Born in California a few years after both parents emigrated from China	1990	Culture and Identity Mother-Daughter relations
<i>The Proposal</i>	<u>Anton Chekhov</u> Born in a town near the Black Sea in Russia	1889	Women and Men
"Girl"	<u>Jamaica Kincaid</u> Born in the West Indies	1978	Culture and Identity Mother-Daughter relations
"Hurricane Katrina: The Corpse on Union Street"	<u>Dan Barry</u> New York Times writer	2005	Faith and Doubt Discrimination
"Where are you going, where have you been?"	<u>Joyce Carol Oates</u> Born in New York to a blue collar family	1970	Innocence and Experience Family Relations
"Mending Wall"	<u>Robert Frost</u> Born in San Francisco, CA	1914	Family and Friends Tradition
"We Real Cool"	<u>Gwendolyn Brooks</u> African American poet raised on the south side of Chicago	1960	Culture and Identity

**While texts are listed in no particular order, if using them in your class, possible ways to organize them on the syllabus can be based on related or connecting themes, historical times and references, or genres (grouping poetry, short fiction, essays, and plays together).*

As illustrated on the table above, the literature list is an eclectic representation of works from various time periods (from mid to late 1800's to early 1900's, through the 20's, 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's, 90's, and present day). In addition, the chosen pieces were written by authors of varying cultures, ethnicities, and geographies, including Pakistani, Chinese, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Columbian, African-American, West Indian, Irish, English, Russian, and with

American writers from the east coast, west coast, and every region in-between. Finally, the list above considers a wide range of themes that most students, regardless of cultural and other differences, can connect to. And while the list may seem long, twenty-five texts could be easily implemented and covered in a 16-week semester online course by coupling a few of the shorter pieces and poetry together in one week.

The overall goal in selecting literature for a diverse audience is to mix it all up like a seasoned deejay—the classic with the contemporary, the political lyrics with the lovesick poetry, the well-known American Idols of literature with the unsung voices of the alien writers. You control the party from behind the scenes, and its success depends on your ability to offer the perfect mix of song (message with medium) to inspire dance (student response and outcome). Of course, not only the quality and selection of the music matters, but the medium in which it is delivered greatly affects the way it is received and interpreted by its audience. You can have an impressive song list at a night club, but if you are using 8-track cassettes or dusty 45's, or if your CD is scratched and the volume is too low and the bass is too high, chances are the lyrics may get lost in your lousy selection of medium, and nobody is dancing. So as you complete your literature selection understand that your job is not yet done—medium makes a difference.

Medium Matters—Using Technology Logically, Ethically, and Imaginatively

And so the third ingredient to consider in this literary discussion is medium and method. My online experience has been with Blackboard only, because this specific online course format is used at the university, community college, and international language schools where I've taught. I am guessing than that it is the most common, and so my references to course websites and other online tools are directly related to Blackboard. This technological software alone offers a buffet of options in engaging students of various learning styles, many of

which I've had extensive success with. The first is the discussion board, which is the heart of all my literature courses. All students must post weekly reading responses on this board, and reply to two or three other students' responses. The goal here is to create a classroom discussion without the classroom. Many students are much more forthcoming than they would be in a traditional classroom, perhaps because of the level of anonymity involved in distance learning. Many however may choose to hop, skip, and stumble their way through this, until they realize it is graded, that there is a word-minimum, and that merely repeating the textbook is not a response, and without accurate citation, it's not only a weak assignment submittal but also plagiarism.

So after the first few weeks, students begin to take this core part of the course seriously and actually begin to connect to the readings and each others' reactions and experiences through the literature. This collaboration allows them not only to view the text through their own experiences but also through each others, and since the classroom is often now so diverse as mentioned earlier, their perspectives become diversified as well. Win-win.

The second part of an online environment that works in teaching literature is the unlimited amount of resources and educational tools available through the Internet. So many colleges and universities now have posted their own blogs, discussions, lecture outlines, and research articles that students can now expand their available resources beyond their own college's library. Many of my assignments link to other universities and schools all over the country, regarding issues like advice on writing, literary criticism, research help, as well as online versions of literature not in their texts. This wealth of information only heightens their experience of the literature and their class, and allows them to collaborate with a much broader and diverse audience.

The third element that seems to engage students are lecture labs such as MyLitLab or MyCompLab. These website links are offered by publishers as bundles to many literature-based anthologies to supplement student learning through video tutorials, literature lectures

and readings, grammar advice, writing guides, and much more. With the risk of sounding like a salesperson for Longman Pearson, MyLitLab has been a core component in all my literature courses, and has offered students of varying learning styles a much needed weekly lecture supplement that they would miss otherwise in an online class.

Other technological resources that can be used to connect students include offering iPod downloadable lectures, using online textbooks, having students create their own blogs, engaging in course-related chat rooms, and providing video lectures, all through the central meeting space—the course website.

Acknowledging Teaching Ethics in Message Delivery and Availability

In the past, the instructor has been the core of many traditional teaching strategies. In online learning, this should not (and logistically cannot) be the case. While the teacher is an instrumental part of the course's production, the role of professor should be redefined and clarified in an online environment. In reevaluating the instructor's role in online learning, six core competencies are suggested, including the instructor's ability to be available, personable, comprehensible, flexible, humble, and in the end—reflective.

Instructor availability is always important in the learning process, but it is essential in an online classroom where students are not graced with the luxury of interacting with an instructor weekly face-to-face. Therefore online teachers need to be extremely responsive and mindful of students' needs daily. Many online students have varied schedules, and are needing assistance later at night and on the weekends. While being on-call 24/7 is not required or expected, it is reasonable for students to expect an response within a 24-hour period. In addition, online office hours, phone conference schedules, and instructor availability should be clearly posted on the course website so students do not feel disconnected. All in all, making a point to be there for them when needed is key in the role as messenger.

In addition to making oneself available, the online instructor must also be personable in a way that makes students comfortable and not intimidated to ask questions. That means willingness to explain in detail more than once the expectations of an assignment, or the explanation of a grade. And tone matters. Offering positive and buffering openings in emails may seem too warm and cozy, but small acts of congeniality are recognizable even through email, and these gestures can help in creating a safe and welcoming learning environment for students. Closing the distance by offering more of your personality through words, as well as possibly adding additional resources of a faculty website or faculty information page, can go a long way to virtually connecting with students.

While personality and responsiveness is key, offering comprehensive directions is also needed in order to help students navigate through the online course. In addition, clarifying assignment instructions and guidelines, presenting material clearly, and outlining expectations well in advance are all essential in providing students with the needed tools to succeed online.

Another shift from traditional classroom teaching to online instruction involves the need to be more flexible when teaching in a virtual environment. Online teaching requires instructors, regardless of previous rigidity in traditional classrooms, to understand and accept that technical issues will happen often and frequently for students. In addition, changing deadlines, altering assignments, and offering extended direction are all possibilities, based on student understanding and response.

With flexibility comes humility and allowing room to grow, for both the curriculum and the teaching strategies used. Being open to suggestions and criticism is needed in order to allow the course to evolve and perfect itself. In the end, willingness to change the course when things go wrong is key in making it a positive and successful experience for your students.

And lastly, being able to honestly reflect on the both the positives and negatives of the course at each semester's end (and welcoming student feedback in this reflection process) is fundamental in order to continue to improve and best support your students in their journey.

In closing, with so much available to cater to learning styles, time limitations, and location and technological challenges, online learning of literature seems to have the potential of offering student an experience unparalleled by the four restrictive walls of an old school classroom. Indeed, as society changes, our ways of educating and learning from each other will also evolve. As messengers, our ultimate goal is to connect the dots between message and medium seamlessly to offer students a clear vision of how to relate to each other through the literature that universally can unite us all.

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