

The Power of Discourse in American Life

Communication 453

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Internet Home Page: ELMS

or <http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~jklumpp/comm453.html>

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“First we use language, and then it uses us.”

Kenneth Burke

The first part of this antithesis is surprising to no one. But the rejoinder violates some of our culture’s basic beliefs about how language works. We see language as ephemeral: invented by a single, free and independent mind, in a moment, with the expectation of achieving a purpose that has soon passed, and the language with it. But we live constantly among evidence to the contrary: language is not ephemeral. A quick visit to any of our monuments in downtown Washington, even a visit to our favorite platitude-spouting aunt, uncle, or father, will tell us otherwise. So what happens when we take these small moments in our life and begin to study the life of a language form. Even the phrase “life of a language form” sounds strange to us. But it won’t to you by the time this course is over, because this course seeks to sharpen your seeing the translucent – language.

The language with which we do everyday life extends beyond us, all around us, forming a context from which we choose and coordinate our behavior. Seeing language this way opens new perspectives on how we live our lives, in contexts of meaning, power, and action. Those who have contributed the most to our understanding of this dimension of language and action have clustered in a study known as contemporary rhetorical theory. In this class, we will begin with them, spending a few weeks seeing what they have established about the relationship between language and action. Then we will finish the semester looking all around us and seeing what the things they teach can reveal about life in our culture.

The power of the ideas we will study is such that you have been exposed to them by now. But their prominence is rather recent. Like your thinking about language, you may not have concentrated on these ideas. When they are associated with each other, they form a way of viewing human action that is different than our older ways of thinking. Indeed, the change is dramatic enough that for many of you this course may be a “conversion experience” – a sudden realization that one former student has called “the click.” I want to bring you to think about your experience of language in this certain way, to appreciate the insights provided by this way of thinking, and, I suppose, to understand why you have not thought of things that other way in the past. I want to help you “get over” to fully appreciating the power of language with which you interact every day.

Because the course is about acquiring a new perspective, before your “click” you will probably wonder where the ole’ nut is coming from; after you will wonder why he is so repetitive. Such is the nature of the beast. So work hard to understand the first few weeks, and then use that understanding to see the way symbols work in the world around you.

Who is the course for?

A college curriculum is composed of many kinds of courses. Some are designed to provide you particular skills useful in a profession for which you are preparing. Another sort of course is designed to communicate information that will mark you as someone with “knowledge” even as it prepares you for *Jeopardy*. A third sort of course is designed to challenge you to think about common knowledge in different ways. It seeks to acquaint you with the power of ideas to shape your experience. Although a well-rounded education should probably include all three of these sorts of courses, realistically different students may find themselves looking for particular types and avoiding others. If you are expecting the first sort of course above, drop this one fast. It will only frustrate you. If you are looking for the second type, you may be disappointed. This is a course of the third sort and expect it to develop with the strengths and weaknesses characteristic of such courses.

So who will find this course appropriate? It will be most exciting for students who like to be challenged to think about their experience differently, who are excited about working hard at new subject matter (but with a great deal of reward, past student evaluations say), who wish to have a richer, rather than just more, knowledge of human communication.

One other observation: this is primarily a lecture course. Some people believe that lecture courses are dull and boring and they cannot stand to sit through day after day of lecture. If that describes you, this is not the course for you. The objectives of this course demand that the instructor be the primary force in conveying the perspective. So, if you detest lecture courses, drop this one.

What knowledge should you have before you come into this course?

In one sense, the less the better. We will spend several weeks getting you to stop thinking about communication that old way. But that is an unfair answer. There is, in actuality, no material that you ought to have before you come here. Skills of synthesis will serve you well. Synthesis is important in your assimilation of the course material. The final exam will be essay type, so will require that you be able to do more than rote repetition of material.

What will the course be like?

There will be three kinds of days in this course. The first will occur in the first four to six weeks and will be lectures about what we know about human symbolic behavior. There is really no way for you to do anything special to prepare for these lectures, just listen carefully and think about the concepts that are being discussed. I think that notes during this part of the course are important, but thinking about the things and asking questions about things you don't understand is more important. Your journals should help your ideas solidify.

After this section of the course, we will have the theory laid out and the second type of day will begin – I will apply the perspective to a number of different phenomena. The more discussion from you the better, although the format will still be lecture. Notes are relatively unimportant in these sessions. In fact, my suggestion would be to write most of your notes after the lectures are

over. Relax and enjoy these lectures. Ask questions where you don't understand something. Provide testimonial where you do understand and you see something that makes sense to you.

The final type of day will be days I turn the class over to you. These will be interspersed among the application lectures. You will have the opportunity to discuss some reading or some shared experience. But I want to do more than simply discuss the readings on these days; I will respond to your thoughts on the broad range of the course. In mastering a perspective, your ability to articulate questions and comments in the language of the perspective is critical. Those who approach these days fully will find them essential to your learning. It is equally essential that I not dominate these days. I will react – say “you have it!” or “try it this way” – and discuss whatever you wish. For a well-rounded course, however, expect these to be your opportunity. There may be lecture material you want to discuss some more. The success of these days is on your shoulders.

In general, then, I recommend this pattern of preparation to get the most out of the course: reserve some time after class each day to work on your notes and to talk about the ideas discussed that day with others from the class, and perhaps this is the time to do your journal; come in and talk with me during office hours or at your convenience if there is something you want me to go through again; and, after we start the applications, go through the lectures after class by going back over your notes on theory.

One final recommendation: don't panic if you do not understand the course at first. In fact, don't panic until about the tenth week. (I will warn you when to push the panic button.) It will not come to everyone quickly, but the material of the course is not additive as the semester progresses, so as long as you have it by the end you will be OK.

Readings and Other Learning Resources

This course does not have a textbook in the traditional sense. In the past, I have had some books for the class to read and discuss. Given the exotic prices of books these days, I have not yet found a book that I believe is worthy of your cherished book money. So I have decided to go without a textbook. Last semester's students endorsed this choice. They also warned, however, that without a textbook you need to be willing to commit to attendance in the class and engage with your questions to make certain you understand the material.

The discussions during the application section of the course will sometimes require your reading some articles that will be posted on ELMS. These will be essays that take the perspective of the course and will structure classroom discussion.

Office Hours

Tu 1-2, W 11-12, and by appointment.

I am in my office a lot more than these hours. I post office hour information on my home page. You can access it from ELMS or the course website. Please just let me know when you can meet with me. To do so you may call me or send me an email.

Participation and Attendance

Attendance in this course is not *required*, but don't let that fool you. Participation in this course, and therefore attendance, are important. Let me convince you of this with multiple approaches.

Let me start by appealing to your reasoning. Attendance is more important in this class than some others because of two facts. First, there is no textbook that covers the material that will be covered in class. The website will provide you "notes." But this is a course where "notes" are virtually worthless. Because the key to the course is not information but perspective, the information contained in notes will not have its full meaning unless you are in class to acquire the perspective. So, you probably will not master the course material. After the first few weeks, there are not even notes. If your classmates are doing a good job in the course, they won't even have notes. They will be listening to the lectures, not capturing them in notes. So if you get notes, they are probably from someone who doesn't get it. So, good reason to be in class.

Second, on those days when you have the opportunity to discuss your understandings, to discuss readings, you are preparing for the final essay exam. Fail to prepare for those discussions, or miss those days and you simply will not do as well on the exam. The experience of past semesters indicates this.

If I did not reach you with the reasons participation is important, let me address your metaphors for education. The culture that values non-attendance at Maryland is based on the consumer metaphor: "I paid for it, so I can go or not, as I choose!" This is dumb "consumerism." If you insist on a business metaphor for your education, the following variation governs: you have not paid for my performance; you have instead entered into a contract with me that says I will teach you about the power of discourse in American life if you will seek to learn. Part of your obligation in that contract is to attend. Of course, you may opt not to enter such a contract. You do so, by dropping this course today.

Finally, there is the blunt side of this trauma that "consumerists" choose to ignore: the old saw, "If you fail to attend you will be punished with a lower grade!" is true in this course. As I ask students on evaluations for advice they would pass along to students taking the course in later semesters, one piece of advice is more prevalent than any other: attend class and participate or you will never learn this perspective. Statistically, they are correct. For example, here is some data from last semester.

- Students with < 4 absences getting A or B - 100%; with > 9 absences - 33%. Thus, your chances of getting an A or B are 3 times as great with < 4 absences as with > 9.
- Students with < 4 absences getting a C or below - 0%; with > 10 absences - 67%. Students with < 4 absences have practically no chance of getting a C or lower. Miss > 10 times, 2 out of 3 students will get a C or lower.

I do not grade on attendance, but without attendance and participation you will not learn the material. Not knowing the material *earns* you a lower grade.

So, if you are in the "attendance optional" school of studenting, drop this course for another.

I will be taking attendance. My major purpose in doing so is to collect data that - along with test responses - help me identify problems mastering the class. I need no excuses when you are not in class. Even if you have the best excuse for missing class, you are going to miss the same material as students who simply skip. So, no need to explain your absence except for days when exams are given.

Of course, I spoke of participation, not just attendance. Being involved in the class, asking questions, and trying out your ideas is what participation in the class is about. You will master those aspects of the course that go beyond the acquisition of information with participation.

If I sound like your attendance is important to me, it is. I will put a great deal of effort into teaching this class and expect your effort in return. Other instructors may not care as much and may have developed methods of teaching that do not depend on attendance. Find those instructors if they fit your lifestyle better than I do.

Disabilities and Religious Observances

The University of Maryland accommodates students with disabilities and recognizes the rights of students to exercise their religious rites. I ask only that you notify me during the first week of classes if you have concerns in either of these areas and require that I accommodate your needs in any way including alteration in the due date or manner of completing assignments. Proper documentation of will be required to complete our arrangements.

Assignments and Examinations

Journal. You should keep a journal of observations you are making about the world around you based on the concepts that you are learning in this course. You need not make entries everyday in your journal, but there should be at least two entries per week.

Primarily, the journal should give evidence of your applying the things you are learning to things you are experiencing outside the class. Early in the course, your journal entry may focus on particular ideas in the lectures on theory that strike you as helpful in understanding a moment you have experienced or, more generally, in giving you a different understanding of the way communication works. You must not just repeat the content of the lecture, but explain how the point relates to things you have experienced, or how they have changed the way you looked at communication. But as the course proceeds, and especially when we move into applications, your entries should use the perspective that you have learned to interpret things you observe around you. These journal entries will be excellent preparation for the essay final.

On those days when you have reading, I will ask that you do a journal entry of reading that may be assigned from time to time during the semester. This entry should be an abstract, summarizing the reading as you understand it, and reacting to it with some thoughts of your own that you might introduce in the classroom discussion.

Each entry should be dated, list its subject and be at least a page long. Journals should be your own work. Rules of academic integrity apply. Material borrowed from elsewhere and commented upon should be properly indicated as quotation and should provide link or full citation.

I will read your journal three times during the semester. The first time I will just comment on how well you are incorporating the material from the class into your work. The other two times I will assign a grade to the journal. Each grade on these last two readings will be worth 10 percent of your grade.

Your journal entries should be entered on the ELMS website. I will access them there to read, comment, and grade.

Mid-term Examination. (tentatively scheduled for March 11, but may be delayed if we have not covered the material). This exam will be objective. It seeks to assess your mastery of the theory that I will lay out early in the semester. There will be multiple choice, definition, and may be short essay questions.

Final Examination. This will be an essay exam testing your ability to apply the things you have learned to reading and experiences around you. The questions may ask you to compare (for example, compare the styles of political discourse we have called “democratic” and “policy”), to apply the perspective (describe the power of language in responses to the media’s presentation of Tiger Wood’s affairs), or to expand on an aspect of the course (discuss the methods by which language forms, perpetuates, and destroys social hierarchy). I will post some sample questions on ELMS to help you prepare for the examination. I also recommend study groups in which you invent questions for each other, listen to answers, then critique the answers to help each other improve your performance. The days when the class is yours will also be days to try out your understanding in a way that will help you prepare for the final. So will your journals.

Make-up exams will only be available for those granted an “excused absence.” They will be a different exam and may have a different format than that described above. You will need to request an excused absence. University policy requires that you do so in writing and "provide *documentary* support for [your] assertion that absence resulted from one of the [approved] causes" (emphasis added). There are thus several obligations if you are going to be absent for the midterm or the final. (1) Notify me as soon as feasible of your upcoming or recent absence and provide documentation for the reason. I am serious about prompt notification. In general you should notify me before your absence. When that is not possible, you need to notify me as soon as you are near a telephone or email. I have voice mail and email that provides a timestamped documentation of your notification. (2) You need to request the make-up (an excused absence) in writing specifying the reason for your absence. The university has a limited number of legitimate reasons for absence (see *University of Maryland Undergraduate Catalog*, <http://www.umd.edu/catalog/index.cfm/show/content.section/c/27/ss/1584/s/1540>) and these are the ones I accept. (3) You must document the validity of the reason you have provided for the absence. Such documentation must be signed by a person who testifies to the reason, and should contain information on contacting (phone or email) someone who can verify the reason. Medical excuses must be from licensed medical personnel, must contain contact information for that personnel, and must indicate a condition requiring absence not simply that you were seen by medical personnel. Please note that it is now the policy of the University Health Center to no longer provide documentation of illness. Thus, if you are ill enough that you need to miss an

exam or assignment you will need to find medical personnel that will provide such documentation.

All examinations are "closed book" and all rules of the Code of Academic Integrity (see *University of Maryland Undergraduate Catalog*, <http://www.umd.edu/catalog/index.cfm/show/content.section/cI27/ss/1583/s/1566>) apply, including the use of the University Honor Pledge on each exam.

Graduate Papers. In addition to the exams, graduate students should submit a paper (3000 to 4000 words) exploring an idea germinated through the lectures or the readings. You should have a claim and marshal some support for that claim, but full documentation is not as important as insight. I am primarily looking to see that you use the material as a stimulus to your own thinking. Due May 1. Papers will be evaluated based on: (1) the quality of insight, (2) the degree to which the paper shows your understanding of the material of the course, (3) the quality of the writing including the clarity with which you advance and elaborate a thesis, and (4) the following of proper form. Chicago (Turabian) or APA form will be accepted. An "A" paper will be superior on all four criteria.

Grading

Undergraduates: Journal, 20 percent; Mid-term, 35 percent; Final exam, 45 percent.

Graduate students: Mid-term, 30 percent; Final exam, 30 percent, Paper, 40 percent.

A word on classroom etiquette

This is a very large class and such classes can get out of hand. I am concerned that everyone assume responsibility for enhancing the learning in the classroom. I will, therefore, insist on consideration for the learning of others. I prefer that you think of the necessary behavior as common courtesy – behaving so that if others do the same, the classroom will be an environment for learning. Just in case, let me be more stern, however. Following are some basic rules:

- No talking or whispering to other students. If you have something to say, say it aloud and we will talk about it.
- Be on time for class. If you are late, sit in a chair as close to the door as possible and avoid disruptive behavior.
- Do not plan to leave class early. If you must, sit close to the door and leave with minimum disruption. If you have problems with physiological needs, relieve them before class or hold them. If you have to leave class, take your books with you because no one will be readmitted.
- Keep your verbal and nonverbal comments about the ideas of other students considerate and be prepared to defend judgments that you make.

The University of Maryland subscribes to policies requiring respect for other students, including policies pertaining to nondiscrimination, sexual harassment and disruption of the class. Those

disrupting the class in any way will be asked to leave the class after a first offense and to drop the course after subsequent problems. Disruptive behavior is defined as any behavior that distracts students concentrating on the normal operation of the class.

Electronics in the Classroom

Please observe the following with regard to electronics:

- Audial electronics (watches, cell phones, computers, etc.) should be turned off or silenced before all classes .
- Cell phones and text messaging devices are potentially disruptive and certainly inappropriate in the classroom. Those engaging them during class time may be asked to leave the classroom. Similarly, no ear phones may be worn during class. Your attention is important to mastery of the subject matter.
- No laptops or other computers will be permitted in class. The most successful students in this course are not the ones with the most complete notes, but students who feel they need notes and find this too restrictive typically reserve time after class to sit down at their computer and compose notes on class. I do not mind students taking longhand notes in class, but mastering facts and information is only the first dimension of the material you need to get from the class. So, do NOT let the taking of notes distract from a more basic understanding of the perspective of the course. It is for this reason that I prohibit computers in class: I do not wish for the things said in class to pass from your ear to your fingertips without your brain engaged.
- No disruptive audio or video recording will be allowed, and any recording at all can occur only with my permission. That permission will be granted only for extraordinary circumstances. Recording is no substitute for attendance.
- No electronic devices of any kind will be permitted on test days.

Course Copyright Restrictions

The lectures that I deliver in this class and course materials I create and distribute for your learning, including power point presentations, tests, outlines, content of this website, and similar materials, are protected by federal copyright law as my original works. You are permitted to take notes of lectures and to use course materials for your use in this course. You are not authorized to reproduce or distribute notes of lectures or my course materials or make any commercial use of them without my express written consent. persons who sell or distribute copies or modified copies of instructors' course materials or assist another person or entity in selling or distributing those materials may be considered in violation of the University Code of Student Conduct, Part 9(k).