

Rhetoric of the Internet

Communication 498I

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Internet Home Page:

<http://www.wam.umd.edu/~jklumpp/comm498i/home.html>

James F. Klumpp

2122 Skinner

E-mail: jklumpp@umd.edu

Voice: 301-405-6520

The internet is a medium of communication. It has common characteristics with many other media of communication – conversation, letter writing, public speaking, business speaking, memo writing, film, television news – and many others you or I could list. And, like those other media, there are unique characteristics of the internet that define its character as different. We are interested in a particular aspect of the internet. We are not interested in the technology, the business, or the regulation of the internet. Only vaguely are we interested in the psychology of internet users, the social characteristics of chat rooms or other internet space, or how the internet is altering day-to-day living. Nor are we interested in the techniques of internet access except as they will assist us, and may be necessary to, our study. As students of the rhetoric of the internet, we are interested in two primary questions: What rhetorical theory should guide invention of discourse within the possibilities of the internet? And, how do the rhetorical characteristics of the internet influence the public communication that creates our society?

These are not narrow questions, but they focus our attention on some issues rather than others. To answer the first, we want to begin by understanding what rhetorical theory is and how it has approached other media of communication. Then we want to use that understanding to formulate our own theory. To answer the second question, we want to take two approaches: to see what others have written about this relationship, and to study the internet to come to our own conclusions about how our social and political practices are changed by its presence.

This course will be unlike many others you take. There is no well-developed theory of the rhetoric of the internet that you will study and master. Current theory is emergent at best. So, you will be a participant in this emergent effort. I will be your guide, not your professor. You will need to think primarily inductively: that is, to study the internet and draw conclusions about what you see. This will require your active participation in class as a contributor, with the acceptance of error, advance, and dead ends as part of everyday classroom experience. So, get wired, immerse yourself in the internet and let's see what we come up with.

Who is the course for?

People who are confident enough in their understanding of communication to operate at the edges of what we know about the subject matter of the course. Also people who are willing to get involved in the give and take of an active classroom. A shrinking violet? Reticent to participate? This may not be the class for you. Want answers from your textbook and instructor? This might not be the course for you.

What will the course be like?

Two activities are most vital to this class: (1) surfing, and (2) discussion. We want to learn some vocabulary and use that vocabulary to understand the internet and the strategies for working in its

medium. This is what we mean by inductive. Between class periods, you will often be asked to surf to find websites or webpages for discussion in class. Sometimes I will give you URLs to examine. You will bring the results of that analysis to class. We will use group work often with groups reporting back to the class on their discoveries.

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

Two types of knowledge will be useful to you. The first is a knowledge of rhetorical theory and how to apply it to discourse. This knowledge is best acquired in COMM 401. Neither the course nor the knowledge is required for this course, but you will be ahead having had it.

The second is a knowledge of how to construct websites and webpages. Again this is not a prerequisite. Instruction will be provided within the class. But the more facile you are in building webpages and websites the easier the assignments will be to do. You do not need to know HTML or any other web language. You should be able to accomplish your purposes with a knowledge of Netscape Composer or Microsoft Front Page or some other webpage construction program.

Readings and Other Learning Resources

- Ilise Benun, *Designing Websites for Every Audience*. Cincinnati: How Design Books, 2003.
- Leonard J. Shedletsky and Joan E. Aitken, *Human Communication on the Internet*. Boston: Pearson, Allyn and Bacon, 2004.
- David M. Anderson and Michael Cornfield, eds. *The Civic Web: Online Politics and Democratic Values*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.
- The Course website.
- The internet.

Equipment and Software Requirements

- You need daily access to the internet. You may access through a home computer or at the WAM labs on campus.
- You need some webpage preparation software. Netscape Composer is available free and is sufficient for your purposes. Other software may be used instead. We will have some basic training in using this software available during the class.
- You need a method of posting webpages to the internet. The university will provide this service free of charge through WAM. You will need to open a WAM account. You can use other ISPs if they are more convenient for you.

Office Hours

Tuesday, 2-3; Wednesday, 11-12; and by appointment.

I am in my office a lot more than these hours. I post office hour information on my web page. You can access it from the course website. You may arrange an appointment by phone or email.

Participation and Attendance

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 intelligence. Attendance is more important in this class than some others because of three facts. First, material on the exams will not all come from the readings. You are responsible for material from lecture and discussion. Second, exams require understanding beyond information, and notes only record information. Although a majority of the exams will test your mastery of information, another large portion of the exam will go beyond information to require that you are able to talk intelligently about strategic discourse. To do this, you must acquire an *ear* and a *voice* for interpreting speeches. Written notes cannot capture nor communicate that. Third, the only way to master the analysis of discourse is to articulate your analysis and the class will provide you that opportunity. You will need to aggressively take advantage of it.

If you cannot be reached by intelligent reasoning on the need for attending and participating, let me address you more frankly. There is a culture at Maryland that values non-attendance based on: "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 interpreting strategic discourse. 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.

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.

A final word for students who add this course after the first day. The university permits you to enroll after the first day of classes, but you are responsible for material from the first class period on. You will put yourself at a disadvantage by enrolling late, and the disadvantage and the responsibility for diminishing it are yours, not the instructor's. You are excused from no assignments which occur before your enrollment. Not being enrolled is not one of the legitimate reasons for absences. This course begins on the first day of class, not the first day after drop/add closes.

Assignments and Grading

Evaluation of Websites. You will have an option of four or five websites for your analysis. Based on the knowledge you have acquired about rhetorical dimensions of design you are to do a two part process:

- Write an evaluation and recommendation page for the website. Your evaluation should be 1500-2000 words (6-8 pages, 10 point, double-spaced). The best papers will evaluate the strategic decisions made in the webpage design, will recommend changes, will provide rationale for those changes based in what you have learned about such design. General rules of scholarly citation apply: that is, when you rely on information acquired from other sources you should credit those sources in a citation method. This paper should be handed in hard copy and in electronic form. Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, or .rtf files are acceptable.
- Redesign the home or welcome page plus 2-4 other pages on the website to implement your recommendations. These redesigns should be submitted in .html format either on a floppy disk or as an email attachment.

Your project will be evaluated on the basis of: (1) the degree to which your mastery of the material from the course is reflected in the product; (2) the quality of the writing; and (3) the presentation of a carefully prepared paper including following of proper form. You may use either the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* or the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* for your form manual. An "A" paper will be superior on all three criteria.

Project is due March 18. 35% of grade.

The Impact of the Internet. You are to prepare a website in which to take one of the topics from Unit 2 or Unit 3 of our course and explore it. Focusing on the dimension or venue of your choice, answer the question: How has the internet changed communication? I expect your project to delve into the subject deeper than we do in class. Projects will be evaluated on: (1) the insight you provide into the relationship between the internet and communication; (2) the implementation of the principles of rhetorical choice in web design learned in unit 1; and (3) the clarity and persuasiveness with which you support your claim. Rules governing the proper acknowledgment of sources apply. These projects will be posted through link to the course website. You should submit the project by forwarding a URL.

Project is due May 11. 35% of grade.

Final Examination. There will be a short (one or two question) essay exam. Make-ups will only be an option for those notifying me in advance that you will be unable to make the regularly scheduled exam and providing a documented reason in line with University policies on excused absences (see *University of Maryland Undergraduate Catalog*, ch. 4, pp. 36-38). The examination is "closed book" and all rules of the Code of Academic Integrity (see *University of Maryland Undergraduate Catalog*, ch. 4, pp. 44-47) apply, including the use of the University Honor Pledge. 20% of grade.

Class Discussion. A grade will be assigned based on the degree of your contribution to the classroom discussion. 10% of grade.

Incompletes. As in all University courses, an “Incomplete Contract” will need to be negotiated if all work is not completed by the end of the semester, or a grade of “F” will be assigned to missing work.

Academic Integrity. You are responsible for knowing the university’s Code of Academic Integrity (see *University of Maryland Undergraduate Catalog*, ch. 4, pp. 44-47). The principles governing that policy are two-fold: (1) the work that I should mark as yours is material that you have authored, and (2) you have the responsibility to give recognition to others whose work you incorporate in your projects. You should review the university’s policy and make certain that you implement these two principles. I encourage group study, but in preparing your projects and in the examination room, work should come from your hand. I will ask all students to complete and sign the honor code on projects and examination.

A word on classroom etiquette

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 judgements 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. According to university regulations I am the final judge of what behavior disrupts my classroom.

Obviously, you need to turn any cell phones or aural pagers off before class and keep them off for the duration.

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 manor of completing assignments.

Electronic Recording of Classroom Sessions

No disruptive 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.