

A Form of Phronesis

Diane Quaglia Beltran

Transgenerational and intergenerational memory relies on the voices of those who precede us. I crave the insights and wisdom of those voices.

I remember a professor in my MA who was fluent in German and read the Greek of Plato and Aristotle. He studied with scholarly luminaries at the University of Chicago; he understood classical rhetorics in a way I may never. In his archiving course, he discussed composition studies evolving into its own discipline and the composition-literature and composition-communications separation; he asked whether we thought the splits were a good idea. Interestingly, I can't remember his answer. He taught writing courses through models of expression that tried on new outfits every 10 years or so: expressivism, cognitivism, socio-cognitivism, social-epistemic, the linguistic turn, right to one's own language, code mixing, code-meshing, digital materialism. His articles were few, but important.

Sitting in his office/storage area on the top floor of an old drafty campus building and looking at his bookshelves was a delight. Anyone who was anyone of note was on those shelves. Crammed shelves that spilled onto the floor: rhetorical history, theory, and criticism, composition theory, writing with computers, WAC, WID, WIC, primers, readers, style guides from the 1800s to 2014. And so many literary works in translation. Whenever we talked outside of class and I thanked him for the conversation, he'd say, "I'm always teaching."

One day his graduate assistant was cleaning out the boxes of books that were stacked at odd angles in his office. Getting rid of duplicates, she said, as she handed a stack to me. On the top was Robert Connors' *Composition-Rhetoric: Background, Theory, & Pedagogy*. Someday, I'd like to have a class of grad students spend part of a semester creating an annotated digital timeline using that book. Someone probably already has. Or at least now they will.

In 2019, I met a composition scholar of note at a retirement gathering. Star-struck PhD student that I was, I thanked him for writing his work on heuristics. He couldn't believe anyone still reads it. People still read Aristotle, or James Berlin, I responded. They're both dead, he responded.

At the retirement gathering, I looked around the room. An endowed professor, a program chair, a publisher/professor. Generations of scholars whose work in rhetoric and composition was foundational to the field. Soon, they'll retire. Two of them have.

Collectively—as an affiliated group who socially perpetuates and carries forward memories and practices—what do we bring forward with to future generations teaching composition? Culturally—as the practiced values, beliefs, artifacts, and technology (yes, writing)—what are we advancing as culturally important? And who are the *we* in either?

Databases with articles become our memory storage, a digital mind palace that we cannot readily navigate without the correct search terms. And whose terms are those? Cultural memory strangely morphs into collective wisdom that never really tastes the phronesis it's supposed to be. The practical wisdom many of us crave as composition instructors comes over time and over years of inquiry and study. I wonder whether that wisdom would be sooner reached through the requested response of pedagogues and scholars like the one in my MA program. Encouraging inter- and transgenerational conversations with mentors, professors, and colleagues through blogs, websites (please, no discussion forums...ok, maybe), podcasts, videos to archive the conversations between generations. We could ask. *We*, the mentees, students, and colleagues.

We all could benefit from their memories of teaching in our field of study and praxis. In the age of digital communications and multiple paths of circulation, *we*, the composition students, teachers, scholars, researchers, have opportunities to include the voices of other generations, older and younger, in a dialogue that could be made widely accessible. I would like to do that during a semester while teaching graduate students. Maybe someone already has.

Maybe I should.