

A Historical and Cultural Rendering of the Rhetoric of Disciplinary Crisis

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Before I define what the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis means, my cultural rhetorics background dictates that I analyze the key terms in that phrase—rhetoric, disciplinary, and crisis. I define rhetoric as a set of communicative practices that a culture creates to make meaning out of their existence. Rhetoric is framed by the historical and cultural needs of the group, and it reflects the values of the group as well. Disciplinary: I term as the type of training needed to produce a certain outcome, an area of study that requires its adherents to conform to be loyal to its norms. Finally, I see crisis as a significant turning point, marked by an event that reveals the instability of a concept that immediate, decisive change is needed or often demanded. With these ideas in mind, I define the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis as a series of discursive patterns that call for prompt review and revision of the academic field. Using three examples from the field of rhetoric and composition—current-traditional, expressivism, and Black contributions—I argue that the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis is one affected by the historical and cultural moment that is based on which groups are allowed to be included, or excluded, in shaping and defining the crisis.

One unique possibility of the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis is that it creates a new discipline. In this situation, external forces call forth a void that needs to be filled, and that void might be created by academia. In that situation, those outside stakeholders ask for new ways of developing concepts that benefit the nation while also shaping the identity of the country. In doing so, the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis creates a field of study that reflects how the nation sees itself and provides methods and theories to help further this national identity. Take, for instance, the current-traditional rhetorical model that defined the early decades of the field of rhetoric and composition. The rise of the Industrial Age in the United States called forth a crisis of how to communicate in an age of the rise of big business. During that time, the demands of business called for a uniform way of communicating through writing, and a crisis of how to effectively write was created. This crisis demanded a standard writing style, which led to the creation of the first year composition class that incorporated current-traditional rhetoric. The crisis (such as it was) was solved because now the lone writer could—after learning the rules of writing—receive a topic, organize their ideas, create a thesis statement, write an outline, and compose a draft.

This shift from focusing on the content of writing to its form resolved the crisis by following current-traditional rhetoric's dictate that good writing

was: current in usage, in grammar, and in objectivity relative to the writer and subject matter. This resolution, which helps further the nation and its identity, is significant to the rhetoric of crisis because it began the creation of a discipline that standardizes distinctions about who belongs (in both the discipline and the nation). As a result of the discourse of crisis, current-traditional rhetoric created a curriculum that served the interest of the professional classes who wanted writing that was technical and formally correct. As well, the curriculum would eventually assist the interest of a nation that—amid a wave of mass immigration from Eastern Europe—fashioned higher education both to distinguish the working class from the dominant class and to privilege white groups. Thus, in this case the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis contains racial and cultural undertones: it was built on determining whose writing was better, and whose writing was better was, in part, determined from linguistic determinations by and from certain racial and economic privileged groups. Solving the disciplinary crisis means resolving the tensions of who is seen as a viable and important part of the country's identity.

To review: Historically, the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis begins when society manufactures a crisis, which is usually by those who represent institutional power. As that crisis is created, the message is marketed to others who need to learn why the crisis is one that they should invest in changing. As calls for fixing the crisis become more vocal, a discipline responds: either through formation or with extant methods that satisfy society. However, in doing so, the discipline does the work of those the institutional powers by excluding groups who those powers deem unfit for the realization of some national identity. So, as the discipline is created (or through its set of established norms), it becomes a reflection of dominant ideology. And, of course, as historical and cultural moments evolve, so does the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis. When societies change—say, through demographic and social movements—so, too, does the nature of the crisis.

Likewise for the Expressivist movement. The advent of social programs such as the GI Bill and the civil rights movement raised calls about being included in society. This call—this public crisis discourse—led the field of rhetoric and composition to develop writing instruction that encouraged students to find personal writing styles unconstrained by conventions. One theory that emerged was Expressivism, a pedagogy that conceived of writing as an art through which the self can discover itself—or at least find its true, authentic voice. For some Expressivist pedagogues, the teacher was to create an inviting environment in which the student could learn through dialoging with themselves, other students, and the teacher about writing. As with the current-traditional example, the discipline responds to this crisis—this time through changing its establish norms—and thus feels itself to have resolved the situation: having added more

voices(s), writing and writing instruction in higher education now more closely reflects the changing demographics of the nation. However, though the discipline grows (in size and power), the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis still hovers over us. The discipline still represents the institutional power of the dominant culture. Those who are not in institutionally powerful cultures are silenced, marginalized, or ignored.

Here emerges a third example of the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis. As the discipline becomes enshrined in powerful higher educational institutions, it begins to reflect and write about its own history. In doing so, it articulates the names of the important voices for shaping that discipline. Usually, the narrative is written through a lens of whiteness, one that often focuses on white males and silences or ignores the voices from various groups. As more marginalized groups enter the discipline through various fields, they begin to see that their voices are often not heard or written into the dominant narrative crafted by the discipline. (Or, the materials that the discipline sees as important does not reflect the communities that those marginalized members teach.) Thus, the rhetoric of crisis in this case necessitates the telling of stories of those marginalized members (and creating education materials that reflect their communities). These movements serve a nation that is reconciling itself with its own identity—with its own histories—and is attempting to add more voices and stories in the narrative of the country.

One example within this disciplinary crisis in rhetoric of composition is the addition of Black voices within the field. Within the last fifty years, dialogues about race and racism have permeated the discourse in the United States. These dialogues have also influenced how the field sees its own history, especially writing instruction at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). While initial mainstream literature on writing pedagogy may have ignored the needs of Blacks, scholars such as Scott Zaluda and David Gold have argued that instructors at some HBCUs used writing pedagogy that incorporated current-traditional rhetoric with social action. In studying the poet and Wiley College instructor Melvin B. Tolson, Gold writes that these schools “emphasized the role of education and literacy in promoting citizenship and community strength” (228). Likewise, Teresa Redd’s *Revelations: An Anthology of Expository Essays by and about Blacks* was a textbook for students at Howard University that highlighted Black people writing essays about the Black experience for Black students. Through this text, students practice writing techniques while also gaining validation that they had experiences to write about (xviii). What is different in this case is that the rhetoric of crisis does not solve the situation. Instead, it reveals more cases of voices that have been ignored or erased from the disciplinary narrative, thereby raising more

awareness of how to make more voices included and creating a more complex narrative of the discipline.

In these three examples, we can see that the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis is one that is shaped by historical and cultural forces. Those forces created the discipline itself, and those same forces call for the discipline to revise and renew how it accounts for who is allowed to narrate the history of the field, the contributions of those who shaped the field, and who will be charged with its future progress. As the discipline of rhetoric & composition thinks of how the historical and cultural events of 2020 and beyond have shaped the country, we also need to consider how these events will shape or next rhetoric of disciplinary crisis. In this examination of our own discipline, we should work to not solve the crisis but to make sure that the crisis response is through inclusive dialogue. In doing that, we can prevent the need for a continuation of the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis.

Works Cited

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