

Rhetorical writing – creating a culture of response in the knowledge organization

In this paper, I want to talk about a pilot study that is part of my dissertation work. I will compare some essential characteristics of the writing done in a Danish consultancy firm, with some of the pedagogical qualities of the Rhetoric Program at the University of Copenhagen. This will lead me to arguing that learning is a vital component of rhetoric, alongside theory and practice.

The pilot study of the collaborative writing of a substantial report written by a group of consultants pointed towards the act of response as being at the same time a given of the collaborative writing done in that organization; yet riddled with problems. As in many consultancies and large organizations, the institutionalized response is a formal review process where a manager reviews and points to necessary changes in the draft. Although writers acknowledged the institutionalized review process as part of the organization's project management, their answers to interview questions indicated that they did not feel comfortable during review. It was 'difficult', and the response they received was not always what they 'wanted to hear', they said. According to managers, the review was not successful because writers did not revise their drafts satisfactorily, even though managers felt that they had given clear directions on necessary changes. The overall picture from the pilot study is one of an unhappy situation; writers do not feel comfortable receiving response, they feel exposed, vulnerable and frequently hurt by response. Managers feel that their response efforts are made in vain. They place the blame on the writers – they are not talented enough.

In contrast to this situation, students at the Rhetoric program at the University of Copenhagen readily engage in giving and receiving response. From when they first enter the program as first year undergraduates, they are required to give and receive response on texts they write and presentations they give. This covers a wide variety of genres, from academic papers to newspaper articles, and organizational documents. As the students progress through the program, the curricular requirement to give and receive response recedes, in theory leaving the students to work individually. But this is not what happens. Instead, the students continue working in informal response groups that they themselves form. They give response to each other on everything from academic papers to applications for part-time jobs. Somehow, a culture of response has emerged. It is my impression that our students become accomplished writers in the five years that they spend studying rhetoric. Indeed the message that they bring back to us after graduation is that the one ability that their employers value the most, is their ability to give response to their colleagues.

So what is the difference between these two response situations?

While the organizational writer is told in the review what does not work in the draft, he is more than likely given little or no indication of what actually does work. Donald Daiker cites several studies showing that teachers of writing are highly unlikely to praise anything but the perfect paper. The overwhelming majority of comments made on papers by teachers are negative; in one study 94% of the comments focused on what students had done poorly or incorrectly (Daiker 1989, s. 103). In another example of teacher comments on a composition, 15 out of 25 teachers did not offer one single comment of praise (Daiker 1989, s. 104). Considering that all managers were students once, and that practices tend to be reproduced unless they are questioned, it is reasonable to assume that, with a few exceptions, the same pattern of giving negative response on a draft exists in the organizational world. That is, we can assume that the organizational writer is unlikely to be told by reviewers to what extent and how her draft is successful.

Pointing out the successful moves and elements in a draft is a required element of giving response at the rhetoric program at the University of Copenhagen. Students must point equally to successful moves in the draft as well as to what works less well. Not only that, they should also comment on *why* that particular move works well in the total composition.

Daiker points out that even composition teachers find it difficult to give praise on a concrete level, and he gives excellent examples of how it can be done. As rhetoricians our students go a step further and respond to the draft in terms of how well it succeeds, or is likely to succeed as a rhetorical move. That is, they see the text as the answer to a unique, specific and complex rhetorical exigence, to quote Bitzer. They judge the qualities of the text by how well they contribute to the persuasive aim of the text in the particular and unique rhetorical situation. And they point out to the writer how he or she has managed to achieve this. They help the writer to see how it can be done by demonstrating it in the material that the writer knows better than anything – his own draft.

At the rhetoric program, a ground rule for giving response is the requirement to give only constructive criticism. Our students learn that they should always give suggestions for improvement when pointing out a flaw in the draft of one of their fellow students. How can it be done better? This requirement can be and is often taken literally: If you don't think the introduction works, rewrite it, or at least some of it. For the writer, such a piece of advice gives him something to work on when he revises. He can use however much or little that his fellow student has given him. The respondent is gaining practice on working on other people's writing.

The organizational review, on the other hand, is ultimately a mechanism for approval or rejection. The purpose of the review is to check the draft for errors and to expose possible problems of the draft to the writer, who then revises in solitude.

I am now getting closer to the crucial difference between the two types of response. One deals with the development of writing skills, and one does not. One is a learning situation, and one is not.

Obviously, the dominant impetus of a university program is educational. In addition, rhetoric as a discipline has a strong pedagogical component. Its theory and practice are closely connected. Historically, rhetorical theory arises from the needs of practitioners. Our students are required to draw on their knowledge of rhetorical theory, putting to use the rhetorical concepts that they study, both in their writing and in their response efforts. The pedagogical rationale behind a curriculum which requires that students give response and work recursively with their writing is not only that the students become better practitioners but that they develop an understanding of the union between theory and practice.

As opposed to this, the main purpose of the review situation at the organization is the final approval of the text. Usually, both writer and reviewer are working to a very tight deadline, and the focus is on the draft. Although MacKinnon among others have pointed out that response holds a large potential for writing development in the organization, in this type of organizational review, the potential is not used.

In order to create and facilitate learning, program administrators and teachers at the rhetoric program ensure that students repeatedly make explicit the criteria for a successful rhetorical endeavour. The learning situation is thus characterized by a certain recursivity. The student goes back to her shortcomings and her successes in order to learn from them. As the task becomes more difficult, there are new errors and successes to learn from. Continuous progression is achieved through practice and informed by the learner's experience.

In the organizational world and perhaps in our working lives in general, there is a low tolerance of errors. We get the job because the organization believes that we are the least likely applicant to make mistakes while on the job. The review process in the knowledge organization focuses on the successful completion of the text. This is a chronology ruled by the end product. Errors obstruct such this linear progression; the organization has no use for them. Successes in the shape of good writing are appreciated, but rarely reflected upon. By the time of deadline the text is – by definition – completed.

As a rhetorician, I – in principle at least – think of the text as something which is never completed. As I write, the argument and structure of the text continues to evolve. I am producing knowledge. Rather than getting the text perfect, what happens is that I decide not to work on it any longer, usually because I have reached my final, not-to-be-postponed deadline.

One last comparison supports the argument that I am getting at.

During their time at the program, the rhetoric students develop a sophisticated meta-language that allows them to grapple with a draft at all levels, from the conceptual level to the structural and lexical level. It could be argued that the sole purpose of the rhetoric program is to equip the students with a meta-language and a theoretical framework that enables them to talk about writing and rhetoric.

As opposed to this, the consultants at the organization have little to say about the writing of the text and the text itself. “Well, by the time we had collected all the data material, we just had to write it down,” the consultants I interviewed in my pilot study, would say when asked to describe the writing process of a report. But they will talk in great detail of the earlier stages of the work process; discussing the political impetus for the report they each were contributing to. Clearly, they think of the writing process as being strictly the physical process of putting words on paper. But I think that such a casual comment indicates a view of language as a neutral ‘container’ of thoughts and ideas. Although we as rhetoricians may by now consider it almost a cliché that language shapes thoughts and actions, this notion is not necessarily one that is entertained beyond the walls of the ivory tower.

Rhetoric is a practice. And rhetoric is theory. And as I said earlier, rhetorical theory stems from practice. But I think that as a discipline, rhetoric has a third component, that of learning.

The meta-language is essential in this respect. Until recently, I thought that a meta-language was a prerequisite for writing and receiving response. But clearly, if we accept the notion that language shapes thought and action, a meta-language is more than a basic tool. As my colleague Elisabeth Hoff-Clausen has made me aware, possessing a meta-language also signifies something as fundamental as reflexivity concerning writing and rhetoric. When we talk about our speaking and writing practice, we are reflecting on it, inquiring, probing, engaging. To me, alongside practice, this is indicative of learning. What I am getting at is the rhetor’s compulsion to make the connection between practice and theory, continuously reassessing and reflecting on her knowledge, practice and experience in order to improve.

To be a practicing rhetorician, as the consultants in my pilot study are, means to manoeuvre within both a learning space and a practice. If you write for a living – whether as a rhetorician or as an engineer, psychologist or it-specialist – your working life takes place within that practice of writing. You write a lot. You feel the potential for improvement.

But in the organization, a view of the text as something simple, a box of word around the facts, seemingly eliminates the need for learning. As the partner in the consultancy firm puts it, “some of my consultants are great writers, and some of them will never learn.”

In the organizational review the rhetorical learning space is neglected, overlooked, ignored. The *re*-view looks back on the draft and then stops, rather than looking forward toward the next act of writing. It represses the space for learning, for improving the consultants’ writing skills.

To wrap this up, I want to point out that the act of response is made possible through a meta-language which allows the writer to reflect on writing as more than a neutral container of knowledge, and more than a basic skill. To create a culture of response in the organization rather than a control system of review, a rhetorical learning space must be opened up within the formalized, organizational review.

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You will not be surprised to hear that I disagree. If you write for a living – whether as a rhetorician or as an engineer, psychologist or it-specialist – you are in a learning space whether you want it or not. A review situation in the organization doesn't work, and feels uncomfortable for the writers, and does not lead to improvements in the draft, because the learning space is neglected, overlooked, ignored. Writing is a meaningful knowledge producing activity, and it is my, totally unfounded, claim that the consultants are aware of this, perhaps without realizing it. The repression of the learning space is felt sorely by the writers because reflexion, recursivity and progression are inseparable from rhetoric.

This will be the hypotheses to be explored in my action research project. I will seek to open up a learning space within the formalized, organizational review situation. I will do that by training reviewers and by reflecting with them on rhetoric and writing, planting the first seedlings of a culture of response.