Writing Spaces: New Rhetoric Pedagogy in Action

1. Introduction

Writing Spaces: Readings on Writings is a free, peer-reviewed textbook licenced under Creative Commons and available for any instructor to use. It is a PDF collection comprised of essays written by college writing professors, who take on a “teacher-as-writer” role to share their personal experiences with college composition (“Writing Spaces: About”). The incentive for high quality content contributions is twofold. First, professors are helping their peers by creating free content to use for classes. Second, the essays are subject to a peer review process, unlike a source such as a Wiki, and therefore contributors’ work will be recognized and properly credited. The structure, composition, and contents are all suggestive of a dialectical, collaborative pedagogy, described by James Berlin (1982) as New Rhetoric. The website for the book describes it as geared towards freshman composition, but also claims that it can be used as a supplemental writing guide across disciplines. As a freely available, interactive text comprised of multiple authors’ viewpoints, Writing Spaces approaches freshman composition from a New Rhetoric pedagogical stance, helping to ease beginning writers into the larger field of academic writing.
2.  *Writing Spaces* as New Rhetoric

According to Berlin’s discussion of New Rhetoric, “data must always be interpreted—structured and organized—in order to have meaning” (Berlin). The format of *Writing Spaces* does not dictate the way that the essays are organized; the twenty one essays are laid out in the table of contents with no headings to group subjects together. In fact, the only reason I know that there are twenty one essays is because I had to count them for myself - there are not even chapter numbers assigned to the essays. Lowe and Zemliansky simply list the essay titles and avoid, as much as the format allows, imposing any structure. The lack of subject headings encourages the teacher or student to choose their own entry point of the text. While the act of creating a list does require beginning and end points, the editors mitigate their chosen ordering by not including chapter numbers which, if included, would have signaled a deliberate organization. Writing is generally understood as a recursive process per cognitive theory, and the open point-of-entry table of contents supports this. There is, admittedly, a loose organization to the list of chapters that mimic the natural writing progress. The first chapters deal with beginning the writing process. The next group tend to focus on research. The following few chapters are geared towards formatting. Finally, the last few chapters are about the miscellaneous end-type processes such as revising, incorporating technology, and mechanics.

Burdick et al (2012) describe the act of publishing as social. They say that “‘to publish’ is to make something public, to place it within a sphere for broad scrutiny, critical engagement, and community debate” (Burdick, 86). The act of publishing itself is a social constructionist act, for the author is contributing her ideas to the public sphere. *Writing Spaces* takes this social act a
step further in the spirit of New Rhetoric by making the text available for free, so that anyone, regardless of financial circumstance, can access and engage with the ideas put forth by the essays.

The content directly addresses readers, inviting them into a dialogue about writing. At the end of each essay, there are a series of questions for students to connect their own experiences with the subjects covered in the essays. In “Composition as a Write of Passage,” Natalie Singh-Corcoran discusses how ubiquitous writing is in daily life. Some of the discussion questions she includes at the end ask students to reflect on writing in their own lives, such as on a daily basis or in their future careers. This not only gets students to think about potential topics for in-class writing, but also helps them, through the textual conversation, find a deeper meaning in their writing.

3. **Implications for the Classroom**

The New Rhetoric approach that *Writing Spaces* embodies has several implications for practical use in the classroom. First, just because the book is written with a dialectical approach in mind does not mean that the teacher is bound to that pedagogical approach. Because the structure is so open-ended, a teacher can impose his own structure in his class syllabus. That’s not to say that it is not possible to do this for textbooks with a more rigidly prescribed structure, however *Writing Spaces* is ideal because it imposes no judgement calls in the first place.

Another consequence of organization that resists a linear model is that the text is flexible enough to mirror individual students’ writing processes. Flower and Hayes (1981) theorize a cognitive process model of writing, where the writing processes of planning, translating, and reviewing are constant, and occur at every level of the writing process. Because the cognitive
processes behind writing are not linear in practice, the teaching of processes should not be organized linearly either. By inviting the reader to enter into the text at her own pace, *Writing Spaces* allows for the reader to intuitively enter into the academic dialogue of meaning-making.

Because the essays are authored by a wide variety of contributors, they are instructional examples of college writing in and of themselves. Students are not limited to one example of writing style, and can therefore evaluate for themselves which they find to be most effective. According to Gorrell (1983), pedagogy should not lose sight of the product of writing when considering the process. He suggests that one way to approach making stew is to taste the final product to determine how it was made; this principle can be applied to writing, where a student “examine[s] the product as a way to find out about the process” (Gorrell, 272-3).

4. **Deviations from New Rhetoric**

While the editors of *Writing Spaces* approach the text from a solidly New Rhetoric standpoint, it does deviate in some cases. First, I question why the editors do not take advantage of the online format to encourage more interactivity. Because a book cannot interact back, students may be responding to the reflection question in a vacuum. This is problematic for New Rhetoric because truth arises out of “writer, audience, reality, language” (Berlin, 774). A student creating meaning on her own falls more in line with Neo-Platonic rhetoric, where truth is “attainable only through internal apprehension” (Berlin, 773). By taking advantage of the online medium of publication, the authors could provide a space for writers and audiences to have a dialogue.

This text also clings to the Positivist rhetoric tradition by reproducing knowledge from writing experts with the implication that they are providing a “correct perception of sense
impressions” (Berlin, 773). A Wiki, with anonymous authors who could contribute no matter what background, would be more in line with a New Rhetoric stance. It is understandable that editors chose a book format with a peer review process - a free book may already be looked down upon as inferior to costly books, and establishing a peer review process and expert contributors helps contribute to the collection’s ethos. Again, this is an area where the editors can take advantage of the online format, where they could include a Wiki on their website to supplement their texts, as well as provide an interactive space for dialectical meaning-creation.

Finally, in line with Positivist pedagogy, the collection includes essays that provide instructions on style conventions of the discourse. The realities of academic writing dictate that students learn conventions such as citations, as Janice Walker discusses in her essay on MLA. Michael Klein and Kristi Shackelfold teach students how to consider design their texts based on academic expectations. While both essays are written in a suggestive, dialectic, New Rhetoric-esque tone rather than in an authoritative tone, the underlying message is still that there are correct formats that students are required to learn in order to be successful.

5. Conclusion

Despite its minor deviations, Writing Spaces is a text that was clearly designed with New Rhetoric pedagogy at the forefront. This text is appropriate for freshman composition, which caters to students of all disciplinary backgrounds, because it does not dictate writing for a certain discipline. It is thorough enough to guide students into academic writing on its own, and flexible enough to be used in conjunction with other textbooks. It is effective for practicing in the classroom because it does not merely dictate writing principles to students, but encourages actual practice.
Works Cited


