
BOOK REVIEWS

Scott L. Miller, Editor

Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA

Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric: Writing, Profession, and Altruism

By Barbara Couture. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. 1998.
236 pages.

Reviewed by Priscilla S. Rogers

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

BARBARA COUTURE'S *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric: Writing, Profession, and Altruism* will be read by a small group of rhetoricians among the compositionists and, perhaps, by their Ph.D. students. Such a small audience for such an important book would be unfortunate. In *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric*, Couture asks readers to reexamine a range of issues that are relevant to business communication teaching and research. She challenges current conceptions of writer voice, critiques the value of argument, extends the notion of collaboration, contends that current conceptions of management as profession are too limited, and much more.

Drawing on the philosophical tradition that finds *meaning in human experience*, Couture proposes an altruistic, noncontestual, open rhetoric aimed toward truth seeking through reciprocity. Given this, some may be inclined to place Couture among those theorists positing a "process-oriented search for consensus . . . rather than a product-oriented effort to impose a predetermined conclusion from without" (LaRoche & Pearson, 1998, p. 282). But the altruistic, reciprocal quest for "truth," which is the crux of Couture's theory, does not fit into this categorization. Altruism does not settle for "consensus." Receptive interaction does not distinguish process and product. And much more than this, rhetoric as truth seeking comprises a way of life or "profession" that builds an accumulative and shared sense of what is important and what is not. Such a "reciprocal sense developed between self and others," Couture suggests, "is not static or discrete, but rather is continually moving, extending, and expanding through speech communication" (p. 81).

Indeed, Couture offers "phenomenological rhetoric" as a way to address "the fix we are in" (p. 7). She associates this "fix" with rhetorical modus operandi that are relativistic and temporal rather than developmental and progressive, that are skeptical rather than spiritual, that are self-centered and combative rather than interpretative, collaborative, and ever concerned with serving the interests of others. Instead of

embracing relativism, where every belief is as good as every other, or accepting dialectical views that articulate the world as white or black, good or evil, valued or worthless; instead of relying on argumentation by which one discourse continually "bests" another, or settling for consensus rather than mutuality; instead of these, Couture calls for a "return to the possibility of universal meaning" through a rhetorical way of being that involves a "conscious commitment to collaboration with others in truth seeking" (p. 4).

As Couture herself observes, "the implications of approaching communications with such broad expectations for reciprocity—being changed and changing others, looking forward and back, realizing both immanent and transcendent meaning—are far reaching" (p. 164). So if phenomenological rhetoric were allowed to reach into the field of business communication, what might it touch? Clearly, it would touch what Couture sees as a "dogged attachment . . . to argumentative methods," a combative tendency that she believes limits our potential to discover knowledge (pp. 58-59). Swales' analysis of research article introductions supports her observation. He found that researchers tend to claim significance for their research by positioning it as critique or reversal of others' findings. Indeed, as Couture admits, *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric* is written along such argumentative lines using, for example, strong declaratives to explicitly side with some (e.g., Edmund Husserl, 1970; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Thomas Kent, 1993) in clear opposition to others (e.g., Jasper Neel, 1988; Herrnstein Smith, 1988). Nevertheless, Couture believes that such argumentative approaches define validity by exclusion and are not the only means to keep a discussion going.

But, much as drama cannot exist without conflict, can scholarship survive without argument? Is there really an alternative? Couture would replace much of argument with collaboration. We can view "the written work of others as it aspires to be part of that conversation seeking truth, rather than as it aspires to win an argument" (p. 29) she wagers. "We are designed to think through attending to others. . . . This is our phenomenological reality," she concludes (p. 221). More than this, she contends that we can create together "something more valuable than we can fathom individually" (p. 137), a notion recalling Thrall's (1992) description of the collaborative partnership among research writers, reviewers, and editors. Along these lines, Couture challenges scholars and other writers alike to seek a redeeming openness in communication rather than writing as argument.

The give-and-take that Couture calls "reciprocity" might also reach into business communication pedagogy, prompting a reexamination of grading procedures that prescribe the teacher as the evaluator and motivator, as well as course constructs such as audience-centered approaches like the "you attitude," "positive emphasis," and "persuasive adaptiveness." Certainly these approaches can be characterized as *responsive* communica-

tive strategies—i.e., getting desired results by centering communications on the receivers' desires and needs. But such approaches place the attention and the obligation on the communicator as the strategist rather than encouraging "a mutual effort to constitute the world"(p. 94) as Couture would have it.

As to the managerial careers for which many business communication students are trained, Couture would prefer that attention be turned toward exploring a seamless way of being in the world. "To practice a profession is not to be a professional" (p. 131), she contends. Indeed, profession involves more than identifying with a professional career or a political cause. Rather, "profession enacted in a phenomenological rhetoric," Couture explains, involves the "ambition to both find and be changed by truth" (p. 132). It is "to embody truth in self-expression, that is to understand truth telling as a personal commitment to interpret the world meaningfully to both oneself and others" (p. 134). Employing this broader perspective, Couture believes individuals have an "*obligation to contribute to some collective enterprise* to discover common values, and to assess . . . quality of life in the light of those discoveries" (p. 132).

Actually, Couture's conception of contributing to some collective enterprise does not seem at all foreign to business communication in some respects. For example, employee performance appraisals in a good number of companies have come to involve a series of oral and written interactions that are regarded as a valued process for discovering "truth." And employees in companies around the world have composed corporate ethical codes and mission statements in a collective effort to discover common values and to assess the quality of their business practices in light of their discoveries. While there are skeptics who continue to view such activities as ultimately manipulative, evidence suggests that some companies have undertaken these and other so-called "sensemaking" activities as earnest steps toward reciprocity. Such activities appear to coincide with Couture's philosophical approach in some respects (e.g. Senge, 1990; Weick, 1995). Still, such practices continue to be regarded by some managers as incongruous to business practice, raising questions of appropriateness and usefulness. Business communication researchers engaged in fieldwork may be particularly well suited to address such questions, testing the applicability of Couture's phenomenological rhetoric to business practice.

Overall, Couture's notions of reciprocity, altruism, and profession recall the kind of reflective discussions one finds in a genre Zaleski recently identified as "spiritual writing [that] seems to be entering its glory years" (1999, p. 27). There is a kind religiosity, an almost spiritual tone in this book, as if the author herself experienced a conversion that forever changed the way she views her discipline. But, *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric* is nothing like a religious tract. Couture's examples are more

practical than devotional, and her statements of "belief," though both fervent and frequent, are reasoned and theoretically grounded as is expected of academic discourse. Couture is grappling with "truth" as it affects day-to-day living, not "TRUTH" as a means of redemption. Clearly, she intends phenomenological rhetoric as a theory of practice.

Beautifully written and idea-layered, *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric* may require four, five, six, or more sittings and considerable rereading, despite ample structural summaries and internal reviews. It clearly helps that the author is an active participant, engaging theorists' views and reader questions throughout the text. In fact, reflective readers will likely debate Couture along the way (e.g. "You're calling scientific writing fetishistic? That's an absurd idea." "But is reciprocity relevant when an employee is asked to write for someone else?") Reading of this nature quickly takes one's mind off the administrative hassles of the day. But more important than this, *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric* provides theoretical constructs suggesting that current business communication research and teaching practices may be too narrow.

REFERENCES

- Herrnstein Smith, B. (1988). *Contingencies of value: Alternative perspectives for critical theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Trans. David Carr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Kent, T. (1993). *Paralogic rhetoric: A theory of communicative interaction*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). The body as expression, and speech. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge; New York: Humanities, 174-199.
- Neel, J. (1988). *Plato, Derrida, and writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- LaRoche, M. G., & Pearson, S. S. (1998 reprint). Rhetoric and rational enterprises: Reassessing discourse in organizations. *Written Communication*, 15(3), July 1985, pp. 246-268.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Thralls, C. (1992). Bakhtin, collaborative partners, and published discourse: A collaborative view of composing. In J. Forman (Ed.), *New Visions of Collaborative Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zaleski, P. (1999, Jan. 10). God help the spiritual writer. *The New York Times Book Review*, Section 7, p. 27.

