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Modality and Rhetorical Awareness: A Comparative Study of Writing Course Environments

Overarching research question: How does the modality of a course (in person vs. online) affect students' ability to develop rhetorical awareness in their writing?

Sub-questions:

1. How do students in fully online writing courses describe or rate their development of rhetorical awareness (understanding of audience, purpose, and context) during the course?

2. How do students in face-to-face writing courses describe or rate their development of rhetorical awareness, and in what ways do these self-reported experiences differ from those of online students?

3. What aspects of each course modality (such as peer feedback, class interaction, assignments, or instructor guidance) do students identify as either contributing to or hindering their development of rhetorical awareness?

Statement of Significance:

Rhetorical awareness is the ability to understand audience, purpose, context, and useful communication strategies. It is a cornerstone of college writing instruction, and it is what enables students to adapt their writing to different situations (Gray 185). Knowing this, it is clear that understanding how course modality influences the development of rhetorical awareness is crucial

as higher education increasingly shifts to online learning (Gray 185). Personally, this research question matters to me because I have experienced both in-person and online writing courses in my own education. I have noticed differences in how I engaged with rhetorical concepts in each format. For example, my face-to-face classes in high school often facilitated open discussion about audience and tone. The online classes that I have been a part of tended to require a more self-guided understanding of these concepts, as a lot of these classes did not include an actual lecture component, or at least a common place where students would gather. These observations ignited some curiosity in me about whether or not course modality actually has an influence on this specific learning outcome. I believe that understanding the impact of modality on learning rhetorical awareness will not only help me and my peers get the most out of our writing courses, but especially the people who are college-bound.

I also believe that other researchers should care about this topic because the findings can help teachers improve how they teach writing, especially now that more classes are being offered in different formats, such as online, in-person, hybrid, etc. By examining student perceptions and (self-reported) outcomes, this research would offer insight into which aspects of each modality help support rhetorical growth or hinder it. Currently, this information is quite underrepresented in the field and is another reason why I wish to research it (Dockter and Borgman 218). This study will bridge a gap in the literature by having a specific focus on rhetorical awareness rather than general course outcomes, helping teachers and educators alike refine curriculum design for the best possible learning opportunities, regardless of modality.

Research design/description of study:

To address the main research question, I will conduct a primary research study using anonymous online surveys of random undergraduate UCF students. I plan for the study to be both descriptive and comparative, focusing on students' self-reported experiences in developing rhetorical awareness in different modalities. These students will have either completed or are very close to completing either ENC 1101 or ENC 1102 in either a face-to-face or an online format. The reason I require exposure in a first-year writing class is that these classes explicitly aim to teach rhetorical awareness (among other things, of course).

In other circumstances, I would have liked to have gathered at least 60 to 100 students, but due to the very tight deadline, I had to decrease this to around 10 to 20 students. I aim for roughly the same number of students who have taken these courses online and those who took them in person. If possible, I will also try and include a group of students who have taken a course online as well as another course in person.

The survey itself will include a combination of Likert-scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree), multiple-choice, and some open-ended questions. These questions will assess the students' perceptions of how their rhetorical awareness developed during the course or courses. To analyze the data, I will use inferential statistics (like the t-test) to check for significant differences in responses between online and in-person students. I will also be looking out for any differences in distribution. For example, if the opinions of the online students are more polarized, but the opinions of the face-to-face students tend towards "agree". I obviously can't use a t-test for the open-ended responses, so for those, I will conduct a qualitative thematic analysis. This will involve me reading through all the answers and observing common themes. I will look for patterns, such as students noting the value of peer review in class or students mentioning the challenges of not consistently seeing their peers in an online course.

Works Cited

Gray, Mary. "Chapter 11. Something Gained: The Role of Online Studios in a Hybrid First-Year

   Writing Course." The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado EBooks, 6 Oct.

   2018, pp. 185–206, https://doi.org/10.37514/per-b.2018.0179.2.11. Accessed 9 Dec.

   2024.

Dockter, Jason, and Jessie Borgman. "Review Essay: Minimizing the Distance in Online Writing

   Courses through Student Engagement." Teaching English in the Two-Year College, vol.

   44, no. 2, 1 Dec. 2016, pp. 213–222, https://doi.org/10.58680/tetyc201628904. Accessed

   27 Oct. 2024.

Timeline:

At the time of writing this, I have exactly two weeks to complete this. In the first two days, I'm going to finalize which secondary sources I plan to have in my final draft, and also decide on which questions will make it into the actual survey. I'm also going to complete my mandatory CITI training during these days. On days 3 and 4, I will revise and finalize the survey and launch it via Google Forms. I will more than likely conduct a brief pilot test with a small group of students (who, for accuracy's sake, will not be a part of the main study sample) for suggestions. On days 5 and 6, I will collect the responses and review the data for potential patterns early on. This will let me get a head start on analysis as the data comes in and will ensure that I'm on track to submit on time. Days 8 through 10 will be when I do a proper analysis of the data. I will perform the statistical tests on the quantitative data and will look for recurring themes in the open-ended responses. On days 11 through 13, I will write the actual report in accordance with the data. Finally, on day 14, I will edit, proofread, and then submit the paper.

Appendices:

NOTE: I will be getting my CITI training done before any surveying occurs.

Below is a sample of the survey questions I have designed to gauge students' views of their rhetorical awareness development in different modalities:

Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. I have given my consent for the information I am providing to be used in this study.

    a. Yes

    b. No

2. What is your age?

    a. 16-19

    b. 20-24

    c. 25-30

3. How do you identify yourself?

    a. Female

    b. Male

    c. Gender Non-Conforming Binary

4. What is your ethnicity?

    a. Open-ended question

5. "Which format best describes how you took your first-year writing course (ENC 1101/1102)?"

    a. Fully online

    b. Fully face-to-face

    c. Hybrid

    d. I have taken first-year writing courses in both online and face-to-face formats

6. "My writing course improved my ability to analyze the rhetorical situation (specifically the audience, purpose, and context of a writing assignment) and to adjust my writing accordingly."

    a. Strongly Agree

      b. Agree

      c. Neutral

      d. Disagree

      e. Strongly Disagree

7. "By the end of the course, I felt confident in identifying the audience and purpose for any given writing assignment and making effective choices in my writing based on that audience and purpose."

      a. Strongly Agree

      b. Agree

      c. Neutral

      d. Disagree

      e. Strongly Disagree

8. "The course modality influenced how I learned about writing for different audiences and contexts."

      a. Strongly Agree

      b. Agree

      c. Neutral

      d. Disagree

      e. Strongly Disagree

9. This question is exclusively for people who've taken a course online: "In the online version of my writing course, the available engagement activities (such as discussion boards, peer reviews, video lectures, etc) gave me sufficient opportunities to engage with my classmates and instructor about writing. These interactions helped me develop a sense

of rhetorical awareness (sense of how to address audience, tone, and purpose in my

writing)."

    a. Strongly Agree

    b. Agree

    c. Neutral

    d. Disagree

    e. Strongly Disagree

10. This question is exclusively for people who've taken a course face-to-face: "In the

face-to-face classroom setting, engagement activities (such as in-class discussions, group

workshops, presentations, etc) helped me understand how to adapt my writing to different

audiences and situations."

    a. Strongly Agree

    b. Agree

    c. Neutral

    d. Disagree

    e. Strongly Disagree

11. This question is exclusively for people who've selected either C or D in question 1:

"Which environment do you feel better supported your development of rhetorical

awareness? Why?"

    a. Open-ended question

12. "Describe one activity in your writing course that either significantly enhanced your

awareness of rhetorical elements or hindered it."

    a. Open-ended question