

KEY CONCEPT STATEMENT

History

Nan Johnson

In this celebratory issue of *Peitho*, we have a significant opportunity to imagine new directions. This moment is like pulling off onto one of those scenic view-spots on mountain and ocean roads: we have the chance to see the vistas in back and in front of us. From there, how does the key concept *history* look for the future? Can we pursue new pathways to exploring the history of rhetoric and composition? We can look back across the last 25 years and see how, as feminist scholars working together, we have expanded the history of women's rhetorical practices and our understanding of the pedagogies that have affected women. My question is: how can we widen the view even further?

How can we widen the view on central questions such as *what and where is rhetorical performance*, and *where and how is pedagogy happening*? These questions have kept us looking for the undiscovered and overlooked places where women were doing and learning rhetoric. The scholarly goals of depth and inclusivity have sponsored our assumption that the more we discover and record, the greater is our understanding of the role of rhetoric and writing in women's lives. We have moved through and past looking for canonical incarnations of rhetorical theory and examples of model practices. As feminists, we have seen the problematic underside of "tradition" and the "exemplary" and headed steadily in the direction of the ordinary and everyday ways that rhetoric and writing are experienced. Widening the view of historical explanation means making that direction even more real by being able to identify more rhetorical practices, more pedagogical sites, and more women's lives.

In my own work, I have been trying to widen the view by engaging with the question: Where and how is pedagogy happening? Having charted academic pedagogy as well as popular uptakes of academic theory in my earlier work, I am now challenging myself with the question: Where *else* has rhetoric and writing pedagogy happened? Following that reliable methodological hunch, seek and you shall find, I have focused recently on locating and studying evidence materials (mostly ephemera) that lie well off the usual research track. The ephemera evidence trail has lead me to surprising sources of pedagogy that have added complexity to my understanding of how women could have acquired rhetoric and composition skills in earlier eras. I would like to share

two of these sources as examples of how ephemera evidence can open up new research pathways.

The *Little Blue Book* series was a popular mail-order venue selling thousands and thousands of volumes for over fifty years. Between 1918 and 1970, *Little Blue Book* sold countless pocket-size volumes (5 cents each) on a range of topics including history, literature, economics, and language. In the 1920's, the *Little Blue Book* series offered readers an entire course of study in rhetoric and writing: *How to Write Letters*, *Punctuation Self-Taught*, *Grammar Self-Taught*, *Common Faults in Writing English*, *Spelling Self-Taught*, *English Composition Self-Taught*, and *Rhetoric Self-Taught* (1925).¹ The clearly demarcated constituents of the *Little Book* curriculum (letters, punctuation, grammar, spelling, composition, and rhetoric) are revealing in terms of how pedagogy was defined for non-academic audiences in the 1920's. The volumes also contain appeals to authorities that are notable. *Rhetoric Self-Taught* includes a summary of "John F. Genung's Rules essential to Paragraph structure" (28). This prompted me to ask, "Hey, exactly how long *did* the late nineteenth-century rhetoric curriculum exert its influence on twentieth-century pedagogy?" The *Little Blue Book* series warrants more study and would certainly raise many research questions beyond mine. That possibility is exactly why I have become so intrigued as a scholar with the layer of evidence the *Little Blue Book* series represents.

Since I have widened my research beyond academic materials, I have been surprised by how much evidence of pedagogical activity I have found. A *Manual for Trade Union Speakers* (1936), a mail-order pamphlet published by the Rand Book Store, is another good example of how ephemera become evidence that implies new directions. The inside cover includes this manual as one the "Important Books and Pamphlets for Students of the Labor Movement." Author August Claessens is described on the title page as "Instructor in Public Speaking, Rand School for Social Science; International Ladies' Garment Workers and other trade unions." This booklet immediately makes me wonder what we could be finding out about the Rand School of Social Science and how it promoted a rhetoric and composition curriculum in the 1930's. Similarly, here is evidence that the Ladies' Garment Worker's Union sponsored rhetorical education. Where are those archives? How did the Ladies' Garment Worker's Union promote Claessens' claim in the "Introduction" that "Every intelligent member of a union should be able to stand up on his or her feet and speak clearly and convincingly"? *A Manual for Trade Union Speakers* seems to provide clear evidence that rhetoric and composition pedagogy was promoted by agencies we have yet to document.

A Manual for Trade Union Speakers and the *Little Blue Book* series are but two types of texts representing a rich layer of historical evidence about how pedagogy has been dispersed that we have barely incorporated into our

scholarship so far. In charting the history of pedagogy, textbooks, curricular evidence, and institutional records and histories will remain indispensable. However, if we want to continue to build an inclusive picture of rhetorical education, I believe we must seek out ways to embrace and integrate print texts like the *Little Blue Book* series and *A Manual for Trade Union Speaker* as well as artifacts of popular and material culture as equally revealing sources of historical evidence.

Multiple kinds of ephemera promise to tell us more about pedagogy: tourist souvenirs, campaign materials, recordings, garments, trade catalogues, postcards, commemorative plates, photographs, newspapers, magazines, children's toys, vintage writing tablets, advertising signs, and entertainment programs.² This is a representative list and quite deliberately not an inclusive one. My work so far suggests to me that the key to recognizing ephemera as evidence does not lie in trying to identify all possible configurations. In fact, that is not really possible in the best sense. Ephemeral materials and modes are everywhere around us. Instead, I gaze now with an abiding curiosity: In what unlikely forms has pedagogy been dispersed or inscribed?

Ephemera materials hold untapped potential for filling gaps in our knowledge about the true range of how rhetoric and writing has mattered in people's lives. I would like to encourage us to have more conversations about the complex historical picture we can develop when we recognize evidence that lies outside formal academic contexts. The collection of ephemera may yield evidence that alternative and counter-pedagogies flourished in venues and modes that up to now have escaped our attention. Stable terms like "teaching," "learning," "composing," "text," "process," and "purpose" may be revised or challenged. We may come up against the altogether unexpected. I am crossing my fingers for that.

Just the idea that there is so much more evidence out there to find is an inspiring way to think about future work and how to widen our view. A wider history is out there, but we do have to look for it. We do have to collect it. They don't call ephemera "ephemera" for no reason. These texts and artifacts are marginalized, fragile, and quickly disappearing. Often ephemera are simply material that no one has yet categorized as important. As feminists, we should understand that dynamic very well. We are truly in a race against time and perception. Artifacts to us are discards to many. Now is the moment.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Lisa Mastrangelo and Wendy Sharer for helping me collect *Rhetoric Self-Taught*.

- 2 Recently collected artifacts in my archive that promise new research pathways include a monthly feature, "Correct Speaking and Writing," in *The Ladies Home Journal* (September 1903; 31); and the *Little Bird Speller* (1912), a children's board game containing punch-out letters for children to place in the proper sequence to name illustrations of birds. *Little Bird Speller* has gotten me excited about the history of how young people have been taught writing in the twentieth century, particularly since so many authors of children's materials were women.

About the Author

Nan Johnson is Professor of English at The Ohio State University where she specializes in the history of rhetoric, feminist rhetorical theory and history, rhetorical criticism, and the teaching of composition. She is the author of *Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America* (1991), *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life: 1866-1910* (2002), and several book chapters, articles, and reviews on rhetorical theory and education, historiography, and women's rhetoric.