

Writing as Social Action: Writing for the Greater Good in the Jesuit Tradition of *Eloquentia Perfecta*

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As a new faculty member at Xavier in the fall of 2015, I was intrigued by the Manresa program and wanted to continue exploring the parameters of Jesuit education through the Ignatian Mentoring Program. My goals for this interaction were twofold: first, to educate myself more fully on the Jesuit tradition and to find my place within it, and secondly to integrate Jesuit principles into a new course I was designing and teaching for the Spring of 2016.

I was excited about many aspects of my new job as an Assistant Professor of English and Writing Program Director at Xavier, but was perhaps the most inspired by the prospect of working and teaching in an environment that supported my most deeply held values. At Xavier, rather than being peripheral to my teaching, values such as reflection and working for the greater good in the service of justice and love were central. This was an idea that was very gratifying to me, and I was very grateful that the Ignatian Mentoring Program was there to support this work.

I met with my mentor, Chris Pramuk from the Theology department, every couple of weeks. It became clear immediately that we had much in common and the readings we chose seemed to arise organically from each discussion. Chris's scholarship on Thomas Merton gave us a productive place to start talking about Jesuit perspectives that integrated well with the course I was designing and my interest in finding a personal intersection with Jesuit spirituality. I was raised Catholic and had been meditating since I was a young child, and Chris and I found that we had a shared interest in contemplative practices. Merton's piece "Rain and the Rhinoceros," along with Burghardt's "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real," gave me a place to connect my own experiences as a life-long meditator to the Jesuit tradition, as well as a vocabulary for integrating this part of my life into the context of an Ignatian environment.

From there we moved to Merton's essay "War and the Crisis of Language," which was the perfect intersection of my field (Rhetoric) and Chris's (Theology) and gave us a wonderful place to start exploring Jesuit values and my place within it, both professionally and personally. Because I teach rhetoric, I have a love of words and understand the deeper meanings and effects that words can have upon the way that we shape reality, both internally and externally. Though he never uses the word "rhetoric," Merton's meditation on the effects of language—especially as it pertains to the escalation of violence—resonated deeply with me and has become a reading that I use with my students as a way of discussing the ethics of rhetorical strategies and language use.

Many of the readings we did engaged the intersections of our common interests and spoke to my professional integration at Xavier. While this is not an exhaustive list, the following works stuck with me in deep ways and helped to form both the course I was designing, as well as my professional identity at Xavier: Kathleen Norris's "Exile, Homeland, and Negative Capability" (from *The Cloister Walk*), which spoke to the magic of creation and the joy of writing; "Reading

Hopkins After Hubble: The Durability of Ignatian Creation Spirituality” by M. Dennis Hamm, SJ, which integrates literary criticism, Ignatian spirituality, and scientific inquiry; “Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today” by Adolfo Nicolas, SJ, which gave me an understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing Jesuit universities throughout the world; and the transcript from a talk by Rowan Williams entitled “Words, War and Silence: Thomas Merton for the Twenty-First Century,” which rounded out our series of discussions by returning to Merton, words, and silence.

If I had to articulate of a theme for the discussions that Chris and I had, I am drawn to reflect upon the dynamic between speaking and silence—words and the pauses between them where reflection and empathy can arise. We spoke a great deal about words, but also about the reflection that occurs in response to them—ideas such as empathy, compassion, and deep listening. It is this dynamic that I remember the most, and one which I then worked to build into the course I was designing and subsequently teaching.

The course that developed out of the discussions I had through the Ignatian Mentoring Program is called “Writing as Social Action” and is based in the Jesuit rhetorical tradition of *eloquentia perfecta*, writing or speaking skillfully for the benefit of the greater good. This course integrated my background in rhetorical history and theory, along with Jesuit principles, to teach students practical, ethical, and effective ways to intervene in the world in service of justice and love. In addition, because rhetorical skill can carry with it the power to shape and change reality, I wanted to make sure that there was a deep reflective component that went along with the course. Not only would we discuss ethics and power as a class, but I also wanted students to reflect deeply on these concepts and how they connect with their own lives, and to find a deeper discernment that they could call upon in situations where their skills or positionality might serve to alter outcomes for others. With Chris’s help and our ongoing dialog, I was able to design a course that spoke to these principles and to continue to explore the ideas and values that formed the foundation of a Jesuit education. Because of the Ignatian Mentoring Program and Chris’s guidance, I felt ready to teach a new course from a very different basis than courses I had taught in the past; I was excited to embark upon a career where this was now my day-to-day work.

In conversations with other faculty members about this course, it was recommended to me that I apply to have the “Writing as Social Action” course approved for the Ethics/Religion and Society flag, and over lunch one day, John Sniegocki suggested that the course would be a good fit for an elective in the Peace Studies minor. Along with approval for the Writing flag, I felt that my new course served the Xavier community and students well and that by designing this course I was finding my way into the professional and spiritual community at Xavier.

Writing Well for the Greater Good

The actual course design included readings in rhetoric history and theory, along with multiple foundational assignments that would ground students in both of these areas. My teaching approach tends toward a “flipped classroom” style where students do a lot of hands-on group work, discussion, and presentation, as opposed to a lecture-style classroom where I do most of the talking. By the second week of the course, students were already engaged in a group research project on the foundations of the Jesuit rhetorical tradition, with each of four groups researching

significant influences in that tradition, including Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and early Christian rhetoricians (e.g. Augustine). In addition to learning about each area, they also had to choose a primary text to read, and then make connections that they could explain to the rest of the class about how the area they researched contributed to our ideas of *eloquentia perfecta*. This was a challenging assignment, both because the timeline was rather short, and because it was a group effort very near the start of the term. However, it was a great way to create cohesion in the class and the projects were surprisingly well informed and coherent.

Next, students found a rhetor—defined as any public writer or speaker—whom they believed embodied the ideals of *eloquentia perfecta*. They wrote short (~4 pages single-spaced) papers about these figures, which included people such as Sojourner Truth, Malaa Yousafzai, Dorothy Day, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Mary Wollstonecraft, Eleanor Roosevelt, Koki Annan, and Mahatma Gandhi. After this project, they explored a variety of rhetorical terms and techniques, and then found one specific term that their previously researched rhetor had used to great effect, and wrote another paper of similar length on that term. Some of these ideas included paraprosochian, repetition, moral reasoning, metaphor, pathos, exigence, aporia, apostrophe, refutation, tone, personification, and ethos. Again, students were called upon to make connections between the rhetorical strategies they researched and their uses in the service of *eloquentia perfecta*, explaining how rhetorical strategies might be used in service of the greater good.

For the remainder of the semester, students chose a particular social issue or cause to research and to which they would contribute their rhetorical talents. Some topics for these inquiries included poverty, childhood mental illness, environmental issues, the Black Lives Matter movement, feminist issues/women's rights, food security, science education, animal rights, literacy, clean water initiatives, arts education, and inner-city children's programs. Students began their inquiries by rhetorically analyzing their issue or cause as it was represented online, asking questions about audience, purpose, and the rhetorical strategies utilized. After this initial work, they built an annotated bibliography on their issue or cause, out of which they wrote both a narrative argument, which is often characterized by personal story, pathos, and ethos, as well as a logos-based argument, characterized by facts, statistics, and logical reasoning. Additionally, they were required to create a multimodal text, such as a video or slide show, that argued for their cause and to ultimately create a web site to house all of this information in one rhetorically effective package for the larger public.

Reflection and Discernment

Alongside research and writing for the class, students engaged in a significant reflective component as well, which was worth 15% of their overall grade. In addition to simply asking students to reflect upon our readings or discussions, this reflective component included practicing particular skills, such as deep listening exercises, mindfulness, and NonViolent Communication. These ideas were integrated into classroom topics congruent with the subject, such as Wayne Booth's Listening Rhetoric, which posits that the most ethical use of rhetoric arises from deeply hearing all sides of an issue, and Rogerian argumentation, founded upon the work of Carl Rogers with effective empathy and reflective listening. Students practiced these techniques with one another and then applied them to the areas they were researching. For

instance, in one exercise, students engaged in deep listening with a partner where the speaker spoke without interruption, explaining why the issue they were researching was of such great importance to them. Then, when a timer buzzed, the listener would reflect back what he or she had heard, and then the speaker would have another chance to respond. Students were then asked to apply this type of “deep listening” to those affected by the issues they were researching. Later, as part of their Reflective Journal writing, they were asked to reflect upon this entire experience and discuss how listening in this manner changed their perceptions.

Another exercise asked students to engage in a mindfulness practice where they were, first, very aware of their place in the room—their body, position, breathing, etc.—but then shifted this perception to a different place within the same room, imagining how this different position would change their perceptions of the space surrounding them. From there, we shifted to more disparate positions, connecting this to the idea of exigence and audience from our rhetorical theory. What would it be like to *be* one of the people we were trying to serve with our rhetorical work? What might it be like to *be* an audience member who either did not know or care about this issue? What could we learn from trying to put ourselves in another’s position? How could we use this practice to serve the greater good and create more effective, compassionate, and ethical rhetorical works?

In these reflective journal entries, students were asked to engage in the meta-cognitive skills that I hope they will carry with them as they take their rhetorical skills out of the classroom and into the larger world. Because rhetoric has always had a close relationship with power, it is my belief that it is imperative to teach ethics, compassion, and empathy alongside rhetoric. In this course, I felt for the first time like I had fully achieved my goal of integrating these ideas in a way that facilitated working for justice and love. I am grateful to the Ignatian Mentoring Program and my mentor, Chris Pramuk, for helping me work through these ideas in their inception and to Xavier for providing an environment where I might continue the tradition of *eloquentia perfecta* for future generations of students.

Excepted from the syllabus:

Course Information

This writing intensive course will examine the history and practice of writing as social action, promoting the Jesuit rhetorical tradition of *eloquentia perfecta*, the art of communicating well for the common good. This tradition combines eloquence with reflection and discernment, and asks students to both analyze and create writing related to social action across a variety of contexts, purposes, genres, and mediums. The goal of the course is to develop students’ writing abilities while also asking them to reflect upon their deeper values and place within the larger world.

In addition to meeting the criteria for the Writing flag, ENGL 319 incorporates the objectives of the Ethics/Religion and Society requirement by integrating ongoing discussion of the moral and ethical implications of writing, rhetoric, and power in both historic and contemporaneous society. This course will examine the significance of rhetoric and persuasion in social action, and ask students to reflect upon—and critically examine—the ways in which rhetoric can be used to either empower or oppress particular people or groups. By cultivating qualities of compassion

alongside building skills of written, oral, and digital communication, students are encouraged to turn their rhetorical abilities toward social action in areas that are most meaningful to them. This informed engagement will constitute the products of this course, as students compose texts meant to intervene in the world around them, for the greater good, in solidarity with and for others.

By the end of the course students will:

- Understand the history of the Jesuit rhetorical tradition and become familiar with the historic orators and rhetoricians who inspire it.
- Demonstrate competency of rhetorical concepts and identify their uses in a variety of situations.
- Apply rhetorical concepts to texts they encounter for the purposes of analysis and understanding.
- Interrogate and analyze the ethical implications of writing, rhetoric, and power in the social realm, historically and contemporaneously.
- Reflect upon the place of communication in society and practice compassion across difference.
- Utilize rhetorical tools to initiate social action to intervene in areas that resonate with their own deeply held values.
- Research issues that are meaningful to them for the purpose of supporting a cause, movement, or other socially invested organization.
- Compose texts that are rhetorically effective and ethically informed.
- Collaborate with people, agencies, organizations, and other students to promote justice through writing and social action.
- Adapt the principles of *eloquentia perfecta* in their own lives to become rhetorically skillful, socially engaged citizens through their own composing practices.

Major Assignments

Historic Inquiry	10%
Rhetorical Term Inquiry	10%
Major Engagement Inquiry	35%
Remediation Inquiry	10%
Reflective Journal	15%
Web Portfolio	10%
Participation	10%