Dissonance and rhetorical inquiry: A Burkean model for critical reading and writing

Kenneth Burke’s concept of perspective by incongruity led to critical inquiry and deeper understandings about the effects of language in this college writing course.

A commonplace idea among teachers interested in writing instruction is the notion that students become better readers through writing (Willinsky, 1990) and better writers through reading (Quakle, 1993; Smith, 1984). In fact, reading and writing activities are increasingly seen as more central to the learning practices in content areas as well (Ehlinger & Pritchard, 1994; Goodson, 1994; Grant, 1993). Additionally, the idea that reading and writing should be “critical” activities that push students beyond the stage of comprehension and interpretation to a higher level of evaluation or critical consciousness is a key concept in both theory and practice (Freire, 1973; hooks, 1994; Lewis, 1991; Shor, 1980).

Lewis (1991), for example, in calling for a redefinition of critical reading, stated that traditional definitions are limited because students are usually asked to judge a work and evaluate its relevancy after comprehension, implying that comprehension is a low-level skill and that critical thinking is a postreading skill. While recognizing the importance of comprehension to the practice of critical reading, Lewis recommended updating traditional definitions “to reflect the limitations of language in capturing meaning and the complexity of the comprehension process” (p. 422). Citing Ennis’s (1985) discussion of critical thinking, Lewis called for a two-dimensional process whereby we, first, understand reading as more than a “black-and-white” conception of absolute meaning on the page and second, include in our reading process the generation and evaluation of
“different possible interpretations” so that we can go about deciding what to believe or do with the ideas in a text (p. 422).

The term critical in most definitions of critical reading and writing seems to imply the process of developing ideas over time and in different ways. Looking closely at development is a logical starting point for any discussion of actual critical practices. Phelps (1990) defined development as bidirectional change whereby an individual's pattern of activities becomes increasingly complex over time and “through which autonomous individuals and their products and environments may become increasingly complex structures, separately and in relationship” (p. 7).

Development is the process by which we become more self-conscious yet more attached to environmental networks at the same time:

Complexity of patterning refers here to the way a mental or cultural structure becomes more finely differentiated into new parts and connections and more highly organized through multiple relationships. As experience feeds information into the system, it becomes denser and richer, creating the need to form new patterns and transform old ones. This model of the mind says that learning creates disorder as well as order, stimulating the creation of more powerful ways of containing and controlling the proliferating information. (Phelps, p. 395)

Dissonance plays a significant part in this view of development. Disorder is not a negative force but a necessary one if growth is to occur, and ultimately Phelps argued for curricular thinking that exploits this tension through design and planning. In fact, she saw that unless conflict and risk become transforming agents for curricular and classroom planning, leading to dynamic co-learning and co-inquiry, nothing will occur but unresponsive, fossilized activity:

...development itself incorporates a negative principle in that its impulse to order must be constantly defeated if growth is to occur. The internal principle for change is disequilibrium. In order to be flexible and adaptive, our mental state must be always somewhat unfinished, disorderly, with potential for new arrangements and novelty generally. (p. 395)

At first this potential may create great anxiety. Students do not like to feel confused, and growing pains as readers and writers can be real. Yet, this spirit of complexity, as suggested by Phelps's view of learning development, has the potential to stimulate and deepen students' development as critical readers and writers through the gradual transformation of their powers of inquiry.

Giroux and McLaren (1989) pushed the notion of critical even further by advocating an education that "reconstructs schooling as a form of cultural politics" (p. xxii) and enables students to understand the complex ways gender, race, class, ethnicity, and age affect our associations of "habits, relations, meanings, desires, representations, and self images" (Giroux, 1989, p. 142).

Such a pedagogy calls upon language use as an activity that willingly acknowledges the "spaces, tensions, and possibilities for struggle" (Giroux, 1989, p. 134).

When we consider the implications of current definitions of critical reading and writing in terms of learning development and actual classroom practice, therefore, a key question becomes, What does it mean for students to develop critical reading and writing skills when critical implies an understanding of multiple and even contradictory events and interpretations? What kind of reading and writing activities, in other words, will engage our students beyond the point of simple comprehension and into the realm of the critical?

Building from Phelps's discussion of learning development as grounded in dissonance, I suggest that reading and writing activities constructed around students' ability to become, over time, rhetorically aware of the complexity of language will ultimately lead to greater critical thinking in the sense used by either Lewis or Giroux and, thus, greater critical reading and writing skills. Approaching reading and writing activities from a rhetorical stance allows us to view language both in terms of production and consumption. On the one hand, rhetoric allows us to acknowledge how we as writers manage to develop a text, and on the other hand, rhetoric allows us to acknowledge how a text can then be understood and believed or not by its readers.

Brent's (1992) theory of reading as rhetorical invention provides the mechanism for either approach:
For reading is not simply a matter of “taking in” others’ ideas. The bubbling rhetorical stew in which we are all immersed from birth presents us with a mass of opinions about everything from the ethicality of abortion to the composition of the moon’s core or the price of eggs.... The process of building a set of beliefs about our world, a set of beliefs that combines matters of the highest import with those of the most triviality, must involve deciding which of these babbling voices to believe, and with what degree of conviction. (p. xii)

Reading is thus an important way of participating in the larger conversation, the one that prompts our beliefs in the first place. By considering the influence of rhetoric on our reading practice and in turn our writing practice, we ultimately position our beliefs, their origins, and why we hold them. Building on current conceptions of reading and writing as social acts, Freedman and Medway (1994) have also examined such practices through the lens of genre study to understand pieces of writing “not just as text types but as typical rhetorical engagements with recurring situations” (p. 3). They note recent understanding of genre as more “fluid and dynamic,” and that specific genres represent “particular social and historical contexts” (p. 3), instead of the traditional emphasis on fixed forms. Students need to learn formal characteristics of genres, in other words, but within the context of specific social situations; they need to learn to use “generic resources to act effectively on a situation through a text” (p. 11).

In connecting this idea of critical reading and writing as rhetorical with Phelps’s idea about the role of dissonance in learning development and Giroux’s and McLaren’s notions about the importance of investigating cultural politics through critical literacy practices, I draw upon a framework provided by Burke’s (1935/1984) idea of perspective by incongruity. It is to this framework that I will now turn before providing an example of critical reading and writing as rhetorical inquiry, dissonant development, and cultural politics in actual classroom practice.

Critical inquiry and Burke’s framework

Kenneth Burke was an American social thinker concerned with coordinating ideas about literature, language, and symbolism throughout a writing career that spanned much of the 20th century. Not easily categorized, Burke wrote on an eclectic range of topics, including anthropology, religion, drama, and history. His body of work is still considered classic in the field of speech communication. Burke saw language as a form of symbolic action allowing us to communicate, but more than that, representing (and repressing) what we do because it identifies our motives. Any kind of interpretation or way of looking at something, according to Burke, was political or “intersted.”

With the publication of Permanence and Change (1935/1984) in the middle of the Great Depression, Burke established a theoretical framework, which he labeled perspective by incongruity, for thinking about how we use language and the way it represents human motivations and individual orientations. The way we use language, our vocabulary, is symbolic of our orientation or the way we see ourselves and the things in our world; it helps us make sense of life and represent ourselves to the world:

We discern situational patterns by means of the particular vocabulary of the cultural group into which we are born. Our minds, as linguistic products, are composed of concepts (verbally molded) which select certain relationships as meaningful. These relationships are not realities, they are interpretations of realities—hence different frameworks of interpretations will lead to different conclusions as to what reality is. (p. 35)

Though language distinguishes us as human beings, we do not share the same realities; thus, the gift of language is mutual yet used differently, and it is this clash of perspectives that Burke believed must be attended to if effective communication is to take place.

Burke believed that we must train ourselves to think about and be sensitive to the complexities inherent in what we say. In order to understand what is going on in the world and within our relationships, we must learn how to juxtapose oppositions that surround us as a permanent part of life. Perspective by incongruity can be used to sort out complexity, to understand ambiguity; it is the “merging of categories once felt to be mutually exclusive” (Burke, 1935/1984, p. 69). Perspective by incongruity gives us a way to describe what is, but
it does so by giving us a way to think about what else might be. Later, in *Attitudes Toward History* (1937/1984), Burke called it "metaphorical extension," a way to interpret

new situations by removing words from their "constitutional" setting. It is not "demoralizing," however, since it is done by the "transcendence" of a new start. It is not negative smuggling, but positive cards-face-up-on-the-table. It is designed to "remoralize" by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy. (p. 309)

Rather than language leading to limited prescriptions, miscommunication, and conflict, language within a framework of perspective by incongruity can lead to a rich and generative process of figuring out complex meaning.

Burke was enough of a pragmatist, however, to recognize the power of our individual interpretations of reality. Our individual "pieties" can help us make sense of things and give us rational systems for coping with the world, they provide us with "the sense of what properly goes with what" (1935/1984, p. 74). Such pieties may indeed help us cope with a complex world, but they may also deter critical understanding of important social issues. Applying Burke's notion to Giroux's and McLaren's emphasis on cultural politics, we can understand how individual pieties may act as blind spots, perpetuating, for instance, damaging viewpoints about race and gender and leading to issues of social injustice.

Confronted with something that goes against the grain of our pious behavior sometimes creates discomfort and conflict, but conversions to new ideas are possible if rationalization is used carefully to construct new possibilities:

...any way of putting the characters of events together is an attempt to convert people, regardless of whether it go by the name of religion, psychotherapy, or science. It is impious, by our definition, insofar as it attacks the kinds of linkage already established. It attempts, by rationalization, to alter the nature of our responses. (Burke, 1935/1984, p. 87)

Perspective by incongruity is much like a philosophy of survival for a modern world where communication is complicated by science and technology. It has become more difficult to talk and to understand with increasing specializations of thought; nevertheless, Burke called for a method of communication that will enable us to cross unfamiliar boundaries and speak to that complexity. Perspective by incongruity helps us to avoid oversimplification and uninformed analogical extension, to break down the barriers in language that keep us ignorant and preoccupied with our own interests. This approach provides a way to live in a world where an "incongruous assortment of incongruities" (p. 122) surrounds us, which we might yet make use of in a creative and limitless fashion.

For Burke, perspective by incongruity offers a rebirth of our imaginative potential as human beings. As we design our teaching practices for reading and writing, keeping Burke's framework in mind, we might think of language activities as paths to inquiry providing more potential for students to become critical thinkers, readers, and writers. Such a framework in current classrooms might indeed help us critically examine the limitations represented in all language use. Our individual interpretations of reality—for instance, the various individual pieties we hear expressed today—may provide a focus for questions about social differences and injustices. Students might well ask what constituency is represented by a text and why, and what constituency is left out and why. Burke may not have considered issues of racial and gender discrimination in 1935, but his perspective by incongruity still provides a lens through which we may do so. We must ask, then, what might such a Burkean classroom, informed through perspective by incongruity, look like?

Creating the space and opportunity for many perspectives represented by individual students to be constructed, communicated, and heard would be a significant primary element of such a classroom. Several strategies already located within learner-centered teaching come to mind here: reading and dialogue journals, freewrites with voluntary sharing, and open discussions about common readings. For Burke's perspective by incongruity to work, however, the teacher must play a pivotal role in selecting and then sequencing common reading and writing assignments around a particular topic of inquiry that is relevant by content area and age level.
The issue of selection and sequencing is central in such a classroom, for it will be in the gradual yet deliberate unfolding of multiple and conflicting ideas that students undertake an examination of an issue through perspective by incongruity. For such an undertaking to succeed within this framework, students should become gradually yet acutely aware of the subtle and often dramatic rhetorical choices made by writers, which in turn affect them as readers.

Finally, students' exposure to such rhetorical choices ultimately results in an understanding of the complex ways that language works in their own lives as readers and writers, one that can then be applied to a variety of other academic and nonacademic reading and writing tasks. Through Burke's concept of "metaphorical extension," the learning experience itself, with all its discomforts and apparent contradictions, becomes a metaphor for what it means to develop critical consciousness.

**Perspective by incongruity and the Rosenberg case**

A writing course that I designed for college sophomores, with a 7-week critical inquiry unit on the 1953 Rosenberg trial, illustrates my argument about the value of connecting dissonance within learning development to rhetorical inquiry through perspective by incongruity. I would further claim that such a course, while clearly appropriate for high school and college-level writing students, could also be translated into reading and writing units for specific content areas, such as social studies or science. In fact, there were times in the course of our unit when my students and I wondered what the distinction was between our study of writing or our study of the Rosenbergs' history and U.S. social issues of the 1950s or our study of the technology of the atomic bomb.

Of course, my choice of a unit pertaining to the Rosenbergs arises in the first place out of my own interest in the 1950s and the history of the Red scare in America. I had completed some extensive reading about the case long before I designed the unit and was particularly interested in how the Rosenbergs' story opened itself to multiple political interpretations. I had participated in antiwar demonstrations during my college years in the 1960s and had deepened my awareness of gender discrimination in the early 1970s with the second wave of feminism. These experiences led me to some natural suspicions about the government's role as well as sympathetic leanings toward Ethel Rosenberg's situation, because it appeared to me that she was a pawn in the case from either the U.S. government's or the Communist Party's perspective.

The serious underpinnings of the case, culminating in the double execution of these parents of two young boys in 1953, provides what I consider to be a dramatic springboard into interest and motivation on the part of my students, most of whom have never heard of the Rosenbergs when we begin. Even if they have not heard of the Rosenbergs, however, I understand from reading Burke that they will probably enter the classroom with perspectives about the death penalty, treason, gender issues, the U.S. military and government, and communism in general. The careful sequencing of reading and writing assignments might teach them something important about how they come to those perspectives and, in turn, something important about the complexity of language, issues of cultural politics, and the nature of critical thought. Studying the Rosenbergs through a variety of reading and writing activities, in other words, becomes a metaphor for the way rhetoric and dissonance play a role in their development as learners and critical thinkers.

**Beginning the unit**

I purposely set out portions of articles and chapters of books in such a way that students are introduced incrementally to the dramatic elements of the Rosenbergs' story and in such a way that I can deliberately acquaint them with the many different approaches that various writers from different backgrounds and disciplines have taken toward the case. As we move through the readings, students become aware of the issue's complexity; it is not a simple case of guilt or innocence. Students' initial straightforward and uncritical reaction to the Rosenbergs' story becomes complicated with each reading they do, and this complexity is then reflected in the intellectual growth I see represented in the content of their
class discussions, informal reading journal entries, and formal writing assignments.

The first reading in the unit sets the tone and the direction we will follow. I choose several excerpts from Louis Nizer’s bestseller on the case, *The Implosion Conspiracy* (1975) because, while written by a lawyer, the book reads like a Hollywood script. The selections I choose give students biographical background on both Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as very poor, Jewish kids from inner-city New York and then skip to the gruesome scene of their electrocutions in 1953. Thus, students are introduced to the dramatic framework of the case: two poor Jewish parents, accused of conspiring to commit espionage, are found guilty of the charge and executed, leaving behind two small children. Nizer is no sympathizer to their cause, but he writes with dramatic emotion about the case.

In our first sharing of reading journal entries, students respond with similar emotion, with rarely a neutral observer and never a question about Nizer’s possible manipulation of language. Instead, they become caught up in a lively argument about whether the Rosenbergs deserved the death penalty and why they were sentenced to death in the first place, with conservatives arguing that they got a just punishment because they were found guilty and liberals arguing that a guilty verdict did not justify the government’s actions. Many students, even those who believe the Rosenbergs to be guilty, are quite distressed over what actually happened to them and feel great emotional sympathy for their lawyer, Manny Bloch, as he races back and forth between the prison and the Supreme Court trying to get a stay of execution. In fact, it is almost impossible for students to react in any way but emotionally because of Nizer’s language. For example, here is Nizer on Ethel’s preparation for death:

> Unlike Julius, she was composed. Her controlled serenity created a heroic impression. She had a Mona Lisa smile, but with an edge of bitterness, and looked every witness in the eye. Some could not return her gaze.... She turned and placed herself in the chair, refusing any helping hand, and watched the guard strap her in as if it was an inconsequential act on an airplane. (Nizer, 1973, p. 481)

My experience is that students inevitably respond emotionally to such writing because of the strength of the dramatic rhetoric. But, of course, my deliberate strategy in selecting and sequencing readings this way depends on the fact that this is exactly how I hope they will react.

Before we finish our class discussion on Nizer’s writing, I bring up Nizer’s own background and ask students pointedly about his objectivity in the case. Many of them respond that his interest is in conveying the facts from his perspective as a lawyer. They often point me to a passage where Nizer’s words seem to confirm their opinion:

> I had no difficulty being objective. I had nothing to overcome. I started with a clean slate; no prior convictions, no desire to demonstrate guilt or innocence. I let my thorough research carry me where it would. There is no stuffed ballot box. The reader will have an opportunity to judge for himself, in accordance with the guidelines I have indicated. (p. 9)

“See,” my students explain. “You can tell that Nizer was simply giving us the facts from an objective point of view.” What I might have called a teachable moment, I now decide to rechristen a “Burkean moment,” as I ask them to look again at Nizer’s introduction and reread the following passage:

> When I was invited by Otto Preminger to write a motion picture script of the Rosenberg spy trial, I declined without hesitation. His continued importunities resulted only in repeated demurrers.... But when Preminger’s insistence and allurements had overcome me, and I shall not describe how, for fear that they will reveal my weakness and also depict his skills of persuasion, which will detract from my own, I set myself a special task. I was going to know as much about the Rosenbergs and the trial as was humanly possible to know, without having defended or prosecuted them. (p. 2)

So what, I ask them, had been Nizer’s initial motivation for writing about the trial? What do they suppose he means by Preminger’s “skills of persuasion”? What finally induced Nizer to complete the project? Given that his book became a bestseller and was originally conceived of as a movie script, it begins to dawn on students that at least part of Nizer’s motivation may have had to do with

**Dissonance and rhetorical inquiry**
with money. Then we look more closely at his use of specific kinds of language to describe the case. How would you describe his style, I ask them. "Intense" ... "dramatic" ... "emotional."

Thus, we arrive at our first rhetorical incongruity. They had begun the class discussion compelled by Nizer's writing to feel one way or another about the case itself. They were either convinced that the Rosenbergs deserved to die, or they felt angry at the government over the nature of the execution. Now they are thinking about Nizer's writing itself. How did it cause them to react? What about Nizer's motivation? Could it have something to do with his language choices? He claims objectivity and often writes in a seemingly factual style, but does his frequent use of emotional language seem to contradict that position? One student points us to another passage where Nizer explains the depth of his research, as he searches for "every person I could find who touched their lives or deaths, as if I were a reporter on a Pulitzer Prize mission" (p. 4). "He gives himself away right there," says the student. "He clearly hopes to be writing a bestseller." Soon the entire argument about the Rosenbergs' guilt disappears under the weight of the question about Nizer's objectivity. The focus is now on whether anyone can be as objective as Nizer claims to be.

By the end of class, students are interrogating Nizer's integrity and wondering how their original perspectives could have arisen from such obvious manipulation. Students are not inclined to quickly reverse their original reactions to the case, but their views are becoming complicated. We begin to talk about the rhetorical constraints operating within Nizer's choice of the bestselling genre. After all, he wanted to draw attention to the case from a wide and general audience and for a particular purpose. He was not sympathetic to the Rosenbergs' position of innocence, though he wanted to convey a certain amount of human empathy for what happened to them and to do so in a way that would clearly sell books. We have thus arrived at a starting point for perspective by incongruity. How will we make sense of this case and understand what actually happened if it is possible that authors' rhetorical choices, operating from within a dense array of social and political influences, continue to complicate and confuse our picture of it? And this question, of course, takes the rest of the unit to answer.

More perspectives
For several weeks the unit unfolds with additional readings, deliberately staged so that the pieces of the Rosenberg case fall into place at the same time that students are exposed to different rhetorical choices, generic structures, and corresponding social and political influences from a variety of writers. They learn how the Rosenbergs were eventually arrested, they learn about the trial itself, they learn about the reactions of the Rosenbergs' sons to the case, they learn about the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals' decision, and they learn how novelists represented the case many years after it was over. Each reading gives students more information but from different perspectives.

Students learn about Ethel from a feminist perspective. Gender issues become quite complex as students' understanding of the case unfolds. For example, Ethel was portrayed throughout the trial as exerting a Svengali-like influence over her husband, Julius, a female role largely condemned in the 1950s U.S., particularly by President Eisenhower who ultimately claimed publicly that Ethel was largely responsible for the entire conspiracy because of the way she dominated her husband. The communists, on the other hand, were adept at portraying Ethel as an innocent housewife, brutally arrested by the government when no evidence implicated her in order to push Julius toward confession. Before her arrest, Ethel also agreed to pose for newspaper photographs holding a dish towel at her kitchen sink, in hopes that popular opinion would be swayed to believing in her innocence. Which image is the real Ethel? Students need to become careful and critical readers in order to make sense of such questions. They need to unpack a writer's rhetorical and generic choices to understand what is being said, to whom, and at what cost.

As the unit continues, students learn more about the arrest and the trial from an American Left perspective. They read actual news coverage from Time magazine, The New York Times, and the communist paper, The Daily Worker. They read what liberals, conservatives, communists, and actual family members have to say. They study the details
of editorials and "factual" newspaper reports, sometimes finding differences in the language but just as often finding similarities. Quite often they become curious enough to make phone calls to family members, wondering about what parents or grandparents may remember of the case.

Occasionally students learn that their relatives rallied in Times Square to support the Rosenbergs' innocence. More important, students slowly begin to discover that even in a so-called objective, concrete version of the story, there is a bias, an interpretation, a theoretical position to be found.

Students do become confused and disconcerted. Language is not supposed to be this complicated or ambiguous; they want to know the truth, any truth, and they want me to tell them. Yet with each reading, new questions are posed, new possibilities uncovered. The only reassurance they find comes from further study, further reading, more talking and thinking and writing. In their reading journals, they leave me messages like the following: "Unfortunately, I think with each news article, the more confused I become" or "I'm beginning to get a little frustrated because I keep changing my mind."

By the end of the unit when a formal analytical argument is called for on some aspect of the way language operates in the case, they are clearly not as naive as when they started. They trust neither a single reading nor a simple reading anymore. The interplay of deliberately sequenced readings, journal responses, and class discussion helps students make informed and invested writing choices for the final assignment.

One student, Steve (not his real name), has, by the time of the final paper, tried to find a way out of a reductionist kind of either/or thinking about the case. Early on he had come to the conclusion that the Rosenbergs had conspired to steal the secret of the atomic bomb, but he is equally troubled by the actions of the U.S. government. He makes the following complex claim:

While I believe that Julius Rosenberg was in fact guilty of those crimes with which he was charged and ultimately convicted, the prosecution "proved" his guilt, and that of his wife Ethel, not so much through the truthful evidence they had, but largely through flawed and manufactured evidence, thus violating their constitutional rights.

The success of Steve's paper comes not because he agrees or disagrees with a particular way of looking at the Rosenberg case but because his work represents an ability to do critical inquiry, to read and explore many perspectives before arriving at a position and then to be able to articulate his conclusion with some complexity. It seems to me that he now understands something about the ambiguity of language and truth.

**Structures of meaning**

Throughout this unit on the Rosenberg case, my students are confronted with a series of dramatic reversals. Just when they have one reading and one perspective figured out, they are stimulated in a different direction by another one. They become sensitized to what Burke, in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950/1969), calls "the range of rhetoric." They learn that we can use words to protect ourselves, to orient ourselves, and even to deceive ourselves. Through an exposure to so many apparently convincing and rationally written perspectives on the Rosenbergs, they learn that one person's way of identifying the case is not another's and that one way of viewing the case may actually blind them to important facts about what happened. It is their task to sort through this complex array of materials and figure out their own position. In fact, they actually apply Burke's following contention to the work they do:

...one can systematically extend the range of rhetoric, if one studies the persuasiveness of false or inadequate terms which may not be directly imposed upon us from without by some skillful speaker, but which we impose upon ourselves, in varying degrees of deliberateness and unawareness, through motives indeterminately self-protective and/or suicidal. (1950/1969, p. 35)

Students can thus become more careful and critical readers and writers as they learn to think more deeply about the rhetorical effects of language. In addition, they learn to juxtapose the effect of a particular text with the experiences they themselves bring to reading. For many students this means paring down their identifications with specific political or social issues from their own backgrounds in order to do justice to a complex understanding of the case. My deliberate staging
of such a reading and writing experience is the instigator of this enactment of critical inquiry. Studying the Rosenberg case becomes a rich and generative metaphor for how to do critical inquiry via the framework of perspective by incongruity.

Coe (1987) echoes Burke when he suggests that rhetorical structures "are...the social memory of standard responses to particular types of rhetorical situations and subject matter" (p. 19). Discourse communities can function to provide and even prescribe preferred language forms for their memberships, and recognizing the importance of conventional forms is "an important aspect of reading" (p. 19). Yet form, as a cultural phenomenon, is never neutral: "a form may be generative insofar as it motivates a search for more information; but any form also biases the direction of the searching and constrains against the discovery of information that does not fit the form" (p. 20).

Students seem to understand this idea of rhetorical structures through their study of the Rosenberg case. They at once rely on their conventional understandings of form (for example, what it takes to write a bestseller) at the same time that they begin to consider its organic, flexible, and especially cultural and political nature.

Students investigating what happened in the Rosenberg case, therefore, begin to develop a set of useful questions about the nature and influence of rhetorical structures, questions also encountered in Coe (1994), including, what purposes does this genre serve, how is it adapted to its particular readers, and how is it appropriate to its context of situation (p. 161). As students try to decipher through a diverse set of readings what was really going on in 1953 when the Rosenbergs faced execution, they learn an important lesson: "that genres are socially real and that to participate effectively in a discourse community one usually must adapt to (or around) readers' generic expectations" (p. 165).

Students become exposed to the possibility of seeing language itself as an active participant in their construction of knowledge. Their frame of reference for understanding the power and complexity of language is expanded, even if their individual pieties are not completely altered. Jake (a pseudonym), for instance, remained adamant that the Rosenbergs' actions were treasonous and that they were guilty. But this fixed notion, admittedly influenced by certain of Jake's conservative leanings, becomes less firmly situated, less simplistic. His early notions evolve into something more complex, and in a final self-assessment for the unit, he comments about factors that influence his own ability to "read" the Rosenberg case.

Without any previous knowledge about the Rosenberg trial, upon knowing that the United States Federal Court found them guilty, I would have no problem with my country's decision because of the rhetorical context that governs the way I see and think about the Rosenberg case. My father's occupation (as a police sergeant) has had the biggest effect on my own personal views about the society that I live in.... I had a pretty strong feeling before even reading the excerpts concerning the trial that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were guilty.

Interestingly, though Jake appears firm in his conviction about the Rosenbergs' guilt, he further admits that he no longer believes they deserved the death penalty because of the government's involvement in concocting a case against Ethel. What seems to have emerged for him is a stronger sense of ambiguity, that things are not necessarily what they appear to be at the surface level. I would argue that Jake is more critically attuned to the complex and rhetorical nature of language, that decisions about what to say and how to say it are specific choices made within specific situations.

Burke said that "only those voices from without are effective which can speak in the language of the voice within" (1950/1969, p. 39). In my class, through the strategies I have described, I ask my students to first react personally to readings in ways they are comfortable with because they are tuned to that voice within, but inevitably I challenge them further to respond to a larger range of voices because I believe that is how critical inquiry in the classroom setting will begin to operate. In the end, they may still be tuned in most strongly to their primary identifications and terms. Individual pieties, after all, are difficult to part with. However, identifications have now been complicated by a way of thinking that extends the range of students' ideas about language possibilities. The students learn to wrangle with rhetoric; or, as Burke (1950/1969) said, when we internalize a variety of motives, we get
a parliamentary wrangle which the individual has put together somewhat as he puts together his fears and hopes, friendships and enmities, health and disease, or those tiny rebirths whereby, in being born to some new condition, he may be dying to a past condition, his development being dialectical, a series of terms in perpetual transformation. (p. 38)

It is perspective by incongruity through carefully designed reading and writing activities that leads to critical inquiry; it is the dissonant note that leads to intellectual growth.

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REFERENCES