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Looking for the Teacher: Ethos in the Online Classroom

Lynne M. Smelser-Gackler

"Ethos as we once thought we knew it is lost, and not" (Corder 312). These words from James Corder are repeated twice in his essay "Hunting for Ethos Where They Say It Can't Be Found." Both times they are followed by the declaration that "we are all word-finders"; we as writers find the words left behind by other word-finders. We seek to interpret texts and we seek to be found within our texts.

Corder's words may seem like an odd beginning to an essay about online teaching, however, my exploration begins as an educator quarreling with myself—just as Corder is doing—about the problematic issue of an author being found within a text. More specifically, I wonder if in an online course where my text is my only way to be present in my classroom, am I actually in attendance? I need to know if I am in my text, if my students are in theirs. In our pursuits as word-finders is ethos both "lost and not"? Not unlike Corder's explorations, I too am bothered by these questions; however, my search goes not to the bookshelf, but to the computer and the "virtual world" that springs to life via text on a screen as I attempt to interact with my online students.

And yes, like Corder I wonder whether to label my curiosity as simply self-serving. He states that as a reader he denies the other in a text, but as a writer he longs to be found within the words he leaves behind. He explains that his "reasons for asserting the presence of ethos in the text are suspect: I assert myself, or try to. I want ethos to be real and in the text so that I can be real to others, not so that they can be real to me" (301). What writer cannot make this confession? Who does not want to be found in a text that she has spent time and energy to shape and form? However, ethos obviously cannot exist in a text, not on these terms.

Terms must change, understandings must be extended, and complex questions must be confronted. Can I ever be found within my texts? Does the problematic issue of ethos compromise my immortality? But more specific and immediate, I must ask, is it ever possible for my students to ever really find me in the texts set up in our online classroom waiting for them to encounter?

To explore these issues by necessity means to begin with a discussion of ethos in an historical context and a tentative definition of ethos, which I follow with a brief examination of an online class. Finally, I end by considering the implication of an educator's ethos in the text of an online course.

Theoretical Background

Although ethos is not a term used by Plato, my discussion of this concept begins within his body of work. In Phaedrus, Plato depicts Socrates stating "I'm going to keep my head wrapped up while I talk, that I may get through my discourse as quickly as possible and that I may not look at you and become embarrassed" (118). He says this just before attempting a speech in response to

one written by Lysias, but recited to him by Phaedrus. Lysias, a professional rhetorician who composed speeches for others to deliver, was considered a master at creating ghostwritten texts that seemed amazingly well matched to the age, status and personality of each client. According to James Baumlin "Lysias's art of rhetoric…demonstrated that human character, with its particular habits, strengths, weaknesses, virtues, and vices can be rendered or represented in language; it was an art that emphasized the role a speaker's character plays in persuasion" (xii).

For Socrates, Lysias's skill was very problematic because of the ethics of such an art, the ethics of separating speaker and words. By covering his face, he is highlighting the breach between the speaker and the ghostwritten text, which Baumlin argues demonstrates the ultimate failure of ethopoiia. "Socrates speaks the words, but he does not, himself, appear in them" (xii). However, Socrates interrupts himself and later proceeds to deliver another speech, this time with his head uncovered, which Baumlin argues signals a restoration of ethical relation between a speaker and his words (xiii).

Socrates's acts of covering and uncovering his head signify the complexities of ethos and understandings of the intertwined roles of ethos, ethics, language and self. Plato's "right rhetoric" is aimed at exploring the connection between human character and language. Baumlin carries this idea further to describe Plato's ethos as "the space where language and truth meet or are made incarnate within the individual" (xiii). Thus there is unity. The speaker cannot be separate from the words for they are indeterminately connected. The ethics of rhetoric thus raises the questions of the nature and aim of ethos.

If we examine the ethics of rhetoric briefly, there are primarily two traditions that arise in response to Plato: Isocratian and Aristotelian. Both address the issue of ethics in varying ways leading to different definitions of ethos. Isocrates addresses the issue of ethics by directing attention to the rhetor. In Antidosis he states: "I consider that the kind of art which can implant honesty and justice in depraved natures has never existed and does not now exist…when anyone elects to speak or write discourses which are worth of praise and honour, it is not conceivable that he will support causes that are unjust or petty" (337). Furthermore, he goes on to argue that "the man who wishes to persuade people will not be negligent as to the matter of character; no, on the contrary he will apply himself above all to establish a most honourable name among his fellow-citizens" (339). Therefore, he is answering Plato's question of the ethics of rhetoric by placing the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the rhetor. As Baumlin contends, discourse becomes the "index of the individual's moral health" and is marked by the manner in which one lives. These ideas then become the seed from which theory such as Quintillian's "good man skilled in speaking" grows (xv).

Aristotle, however, does not support Isocrates's views. For Aristotle, whose concept of ethos has had a profound effect on modern rhetorical criticism, the issue is not so much being good as it is seeming good to the audience. Ethics grow not from the person's life, but are created during the act of speaking. He states that

Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible

and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like others should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins speaking. (153)

Therefore, rhetoric becomes the act of constructing ethos (as opposed to Isocrates's view in which rhetoric reveals character), as Aristotle further contends the "[the orator] must make his own character look right and put his hearers who are to decide, into the right frame of mind" (160). He then goes on to explain how someone may "inspire confidence in the orator's own character—the three, namely that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: good sense, good moral character, and goodwill" (161). Baumlin argues that in Aristotle's model the rhetorical situation makes the speaker an aspect of the discourse itself…the speaker existing as someone beyond the originator of the speech (xvii). Does this mean then that the author is an integral part of the text, intertwined for the reader? This leads us back to Corder's queries:

Will anyone notice that I am here, that this is the way I talk, that this is what in my mind passes for thinking? …Life is real, and the artificial compartments we create for it don't work. What gets said in one place keeps slopping over and meaning something in other places. What gets said in literary theory resonates in all other places, so I'm no longer talking just about literary theory, if I ever was; I'm talking about my own identity now, the nuttiness that is mine. (302)

Where does ethos exist? Is it within a person? Constructed within a text? Both? Neither?

These questions are not new ones. They, like the above discussion, have a historical trail, a conversation that has spanned from romantic notions of the lone author revealing herself in writing to postmodern issues hailing the death of the author in a text and beyond. But while debates go on about where the author resides—if at all—I have another question. Does the teacher exist? As technology turns classrooms into on-screen texts in progress I find myself wondering whether an educator's ethos can be found in the text of an online classroom.

Therefore, before we move into a brief look at online teaching, we must seriously consider the lens through which we examine ethos. Marshall Alcorn, Jr. in his discussion of the relationship between self and ethos asserts that how society today may define self "differs from the Aristotelian self, and because of this, an Aristotelian ethos differs from a modern ethos." He further explains that "the larger structure of ethos—the particular mechanisms governing how personality can itself be persuasive—is different in the two models" (17). Alcorn then describes ethos as "a relationship existing between the discourse structures of selves and the discourse structures of 'texts'" (6). Alcorn's point is that the meaning of ethos and more significantly its power in any given moment in time or historical situation is not static. The role of ethos imagined by any of the classical rhetoricians must by necessity differ from ours, and so in the confines of my discussion I offer a working description of my own of ethos as a flexible conception of discourse relationships between writer and text and the character revealed within that relationship. Before exploring this further, let us consider this present day as our moment in time and the situation of online teaching.

Virtual Classrooms

More than 400 accredited colleges and universities in North America currently use some form of online instruction and roughly 150 accredited institutions offer complete bachelor's degree

programs allowing students to avoid traveling to campus almost entirely (Schulman and Sims 54). For every one of the courses offered in these programs there is a professor facing a screen instead of a classroom, hearing the hum of her computer rather than the whispers of students, and attempting to engage students in interactions that will involve words as well as visual designs. On the other side of the screen, multitudes of students are facing their computers instead of their classroom community, hearing the hum of computers rather than the voices of professors, and attempting to make sense of their interactions.

Internet sites such as the above described "classrooms" now have become the newest sites of rhetorical acts. As Susan Hilligoss contends in her manual Visual Communication, A Writer's Guide all aspects of a web page—including the design—contribute to the creation of ethos for an online educator (1). Students sign on to "meet" their instructors, read any greetings or guidelines available and then proceed through the course catching glimpses of the other members of the classroom community via e-mail, chat rooms, and other snippets of communication.

The computer as classroom offers the opportunity for all voices to be heard observes Joan Turnow in her ethnographic look at a networked classroom (xx). However, in a course that is solely online with no face-to-face interaction, the opportunity changes slightly. The relationships between class members who are unknown to one another become literal texts for one another, including the professor, texts that appear in chat rooms, threaded discussions, posted drafts, and journal entries.

But not all online classes are completely texts, some attempt to bring a new element slightly more similar to classical rhetorical situations: a speech. Instructors are given less than ten minutes to "create a persona" for their students in an online introductory video. According to Joe Hartwig, an Instructional Design Consultant with eCollege.com, a business that assists colleges and universities in creating online courses, online videos are "the best medium to show the person behind the monitor." Hartwig contends that it is vital for instructors to consciously present themselves in as many ways as possible, a concept often translated as "high touch" in the high tech world of virtual learning (e-mail April 19, 2000).

Therefore, online classroom interactions involve a created ethos similar to that described by Aristotle. As the discourse progresses professors and students have the opportunity "to create the self"—a concept which I do not wish to imply in this brief discussion is anything but complex and problematic—to be presented to the class, which for instructors could mean the difference between a successful educational experience and an unsuccessful one. A study conducted by the New Jersey Institute of Technology concluded that the success of a virtual classroom was dependent upon, among other things, the instructor's ability to persuade students to accept and become active in the online learning environment. An instructor must appear to be present, caring and authoritative (Kearsley, 48).

Implications

But even as we have considered the theoretical background for ethos and the online setting in which I frame my explorations, there is still one facet left unexplored: the role of the audience/student. I have purposely left this discussion for my examination of implications since

it is this facet that complicates understandings of ethos and yet significantly affects the outcome of attempts to create it.

Aristotle uses verbs such as believe, think and seem to explain ethos and this suggests that he recognized—perhaps more so than many of the rhetoricians after him—that ethical appeal is a radically psychological event situated in the mental processes of audience, which belongs as much to the audience as to the actual character of the speaker. Aristotle's ethos implies "an audience's projection of authority and trustworthiness onto the speaker, a projection that is triggered or elicited by the speaker but otherwise supplied by the audience" (Baumlin and Baumlin 99). Eugene Ryan argues similarly that

as a means of shaping the ethos of a society. Speakers, using the art of rhetoric, would over a period of time have a great impact on the ethos or character of a society. In no way was it Aristotle's view that the ethos was completely determined by speakers, but rather that it was developed by an interplay between speakers and hearers, hearers who on the one hand would be influenced by the speakers, and on the other hand themselves be such that Aristotle could write of them that they "are sufficiently disposed toward what is true, and most of the time they attain the truth." (qtd. in Neel 164).

Corder confesses to arguing with himself over this issue. He laments language being "orphaned" from its speaker "authors first distanced, now fade away into nothing" (301) echoing Plato:

Writing…has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it was written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself. (141)

Corder goes on to cite recent theories which he claims "clearly prove" that there really are no word-finders out there: "ethos is chiefly our creation as we read, not the author's creation, and not in the text." Then he continues with the declaration from Barthes that "the birth of the reader must be at all costs the death of the author." However, Corder is not willing to give up just yet. He finds hope in others like Alcorn who offer "various means of saving the text, if not the author" (310). That hope comes from the idea that a reader's projective activities "are filtered and altered by a certain notion of textual objectivity: objectivity as defined by the text's material signifiers" (Alcorn qtd. by Corder 311). According to Corder's interpretations this means there is hope because "authors, whatever their intentions, leave trails for us" (311).

Does this mean that I may actually be present in my virtual classroom? Maybe. Maybe not. However, I would like to believe with Corder that even if I, as a writer of my classroom text, am not totally present or in control at the very least there is a wisp of me in the words. There are markers left by me for my students to follow. Some are markers of the me that is a writer and a fellow learner in the online environment. Some are the markers of me the educator who enjoys a

certain relationship to my course text as a result of the status imbued upon professors just as Sharon Crowley contends in her discussion of situated ethos that "because rhetoric is embedded in social context, the relative social standing of participants in a rhetorical situation can affect a rhetor's persuasiveness" (133).

Corder finds even more hope in the thought that perhaps writers and speakers still possess the power to "startle us into new thought, not depending solely upon the gratification or fulfillment of what we are already thinking" (313). Although he admits that this may not happen often, at least it may happen. And that, for me, is the greatest implication of this study. I want desperately to startle readers with all of my writing, but perhaps there is no concern so pressing—at least at this moment—than the one of educating a group of people whose faces I will never see. Online educators have many things in common with their off-line counterparts, but unfortunately, one of them isn't the ability to see the smiles, frowns, or nods of students engaged in the discourse. I have my words, or rather I should say they have my words. Am I in them? Have I ever truly startled these students into new thoughts?

These are questions for future study; however, before I can leave the current discussion there is one more side to examine. For even as students read and create my ethos in the classroom they are also writers of the course text and therefore, full participants in the struggle to be found in the writing appearing in our course space. Many of my students opted for more extremes in their efforts even going so far as to eschew their race and gender in attempts to alter their relationships to their words and in effect writing for an imagined person just as Lysias wrote for clients. I received questions about whether they could represent themselves as a different gender or race in their classroom interactions. These queries are problematic from many perspectives, but going back to Plato, I initially wondered about the ethical issues involved with separating the speaker from her words in such a way.

I argue with myself about whether such a thing as a natural ethos exists and if so, then by overtly denying their own biological traits were my students altering a natural ethos? How will their abilities to create new character traits for themselves affect how they interpret what I or their classmates post? But my argument does not end there because I could just as easily counter that all of what we post—even if we could define them as "true" to our traits—are anything more than our own interpretations of those traits anyway, and that our own deeply held definitions of such terms as "good" and "goodwill" are always affected by who we wish ourselves to be.

Conclusion

My attempt to explore ethos, that flexible conception of relationships between writer and text and the character revealed within that relationship, does not resolve as many of my inner arguments as it creates. Am I a word-finder? Do they exist? Ethos as I once knew it is lost, and not. Again, I hear echoes of Corder's essay:

We're all word-finders. We make ethos from the words we find, but some word-finder is leaving us words to find, telling an ethos toward us, altering ours in the process. Even in our conventional studies we have seldom kept ethos well located, mixing terms, sometimes using ethos, persona, and voice as if identical and perhaps they are in the minds of some. The

confusions, if it is that, does, however, reveal an interesting anomaly and may provide unexpected testimony that ethos may yet get into a text.

Ethos as we once thought we knew it is lost, and not. We're all word-finders. We make ethos from the words we find, and some word-finder is always leaving words for us to find, telling an ethos toward us, crowding living time into composing time into our reading time, trying to become somebody in the midst of a crowd, trying to get caught in language in front of others. (312)

And so I enter my name, my password, and I type words onto a computer screen. I send these words to my students…greetings, updates, and perhaps once in a while I affect a challenging thought. My students in turn watch my video, read words on the screen and attempt to tell me who they are even as they wrestle with who I am. But perhaps they don't wrestle; perhaps if I were honest, I would admit that often the quest to find ethos in the online class is my desire to be heard in ways that I often forget to try to listen to others; perhaps my students don't wrestle and perhaps is no reason.

And yet, there is, for if I am to be found in my class text, I must now look for them in it. "Ethos is lost, and not." And so I continue Corder's arguments, my arguments, my clinging hope for actually being in attendance in my online course. Corder ends his essay by saying "Ethos is in there somewhere. Please send word if you find it" (315). Perhaps someday I will, or perhaps more likely I will simply continue my search asking to be heard and stopping to listen along the way.

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