Toward an Engaged Rhetoric of Professional Practice

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In “Writing an Important Body of Scholarship,” Jane Hindman provides a number of important reasons for her “proposal for an embodied rhetoric of professional practice.” Among them are the need to demystify the rhetoric that professional practice authorizes, “make visible the source of the legitimacy of what we do as compositionists,” “facilitate our efforts to effect change in our own and in our students’ lives,” and “uncover the possibilities for feminist agency in our practices as professional academics” (93–98). Of these reasons, I find the last two most compelling because they are outward directed and focus on the effects our words can have on the larger world. I also consider the first two reasons worthwhile, but I am less sanguine about their potential to create change because they are inward directed and may lead us to engage in solipsistic discourse and to undermine some of the hard-won authority and respect composition studies has slowly gained as a discipline.

Hindman’s proposal for an embodied rhetoric of professional practice—for the use of autobiographical, personal moves that challenge and demystify professional authority—seems valuable to me when it advances our understanding in specific ways, when it helps to change professional practice, whether those changes are in the way we write, read, engage in scholarship, teach, or interact with colleagues, students, peers, and the world at large. However, I find an embodied rhetoric less powerful when it is used as a rhetorical strategy intended to startle, surprise, or disrupt the discourse at hand, such as when a writer calls attention to the fact that she is sitting in her study with “in stocking feet” (Tompkins 175), or the fact that she may have felt “frustrated and fettered” (Hindman). Unless those facts deepen our understanding of the subject matter at hand, I find that the rhetorical gesture of disruption, interruption, or destabilization is not particularly powerful. Of course, making a judgment about whether something deepens our understanding is not an easy task. I can certainly think of examples where minute autobiographical details are used to powerful effect, such as Virginia Woolf’s description of a moth fluttering against the window pane in an essay in which she reflects on a central life force, or Terry Zawacki’s
description of gardening through which she illustrates her understand­
ing of the writing process while simultaneously enacting an experi­mental feminist discourse. Writing the body into professional discourse is certainly important; feminists have long shown that who speaks, who is heard, who can assume authority, and who is be­lieved—all these factors—are socially constructed and thoroughly embodied.

However, I am concerned that the practice of an embodied rhetoric, as Hindman describes it, can be limiting and limited. Similar to the position that Joy Ritchie and I took regarding the limitations of the personal, I want to argue here that we need to be cautious about “ever­shifting, transient, emergent, never contained” kinds of writing lest we slip into a self-content, self-absorbed, and self-centered discourse (106).

We need to remember that an embodied rhetoric—one that employs personal, autobiographical, and reflective strategies—can be and often is limiting for a number of reasons: our limited ability to comprehend the reality and experiences of others; the impossibility of stepping outside our point of view, body, and experiences (see Lu and Horner; Brandt et al.); and the concomitant danger of using our experiences to natural­ize, authenticate, and validate our own experiences while silencing those of others.

Lastly, I am concerned that Hindman’s proposal for an embodied rhetoric—a rhetoric that would “stage the authority of . . . expertise and simultaneously expose it as a rhetorical pose, a gesture, an authority presumed by the autobiography of [the] profession”—can undermine and disempower scholars in the field, especially women, whose authority is often questioned by virtue of their gender and, furthermore, by virtue of their association with composition studies and the teaching of first-year students (106). Although Hindman’s proposed use of rhetorical strategies may demystify professional discourse and the gestures associated with it, it may serve neither our own nor our students’ best interests. I suggest, therefore, that we need to consider first and foremost the effects we want to have within the profession, the academy, and the larger realm of public discourse. There may be times when an embodied rhetoric of the kind Hindman proposes would serve our goals well, but at other times we might want to make other rhetorical moves.

I want to take Hindman’s proposal for an embodied rhetoric of professional practice, then, as a starting point for making a case for what I call an “engaged rhetoric of professional practice,” one that seeks to effect change. I envision an engaged rhetoric that starts with questions
about the desired outcome of our discourse, the material effects of our rhetoric, its impact on our students’ lives, on our community, on our institutions, on our values, and especially on the lives of those who find themselves living in rhetorically and materially disempowered spaces in society. Such an “engaged rhetoric” would make moves beyond the ones Hindman calls for, moves that are action oriented, civic minded, and materially based, all in order to attend to larger questions about literacy and writing in the academy and society at large. I suggest that attending to ethics can serve as a powerful strategy, one way to assess our efforts and outcomes while also staying vigilant about the dangers of speaking for others, imposing our values on others, and/or naturalizing our experience.

To illustrate what an engaged, material rhetoric might look like, I will turn to three areas of our discipline: research, scholarship, and teaching. I begin with an argument I developed in greater depth in *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research* and show what an engaged rhetoric might look like in research studies. I then turn to scholarly publications, specifically, to a *CCC* article that I find clearly illustrates the importance of an embodied and engaged rhetoric. Finally, I illustrate what an engaged rhetoric might look like in the classroom by drawing examples from a writing course that uses ethical theories as a rhetorical framework.

**Engaged Research**

What might an engaged rhetoric of professional practice look like? Autobiographical, personal, reflective, and open-ended at times, to be sure. But also “impersonal, detached, objective, structured,” abstract, logical (and all the other “devil term” qualities Hindman invokes) when the occasion calls for it (103). I am envisioning a rhetoric that is first and foremost materially and ethically grounded, that asks about desired outcomes (whose desire? whose outcome?), about the possible effects on all stakeholders (including primary, secondary, and tertiary ones), such as the students or other participants described in our scholarship; their immediate families, friends, and relatives; the surrounding community and institutions (including schools, churches, community centers, and government agencies); as well as writers and readers of such scholarship.

What I am proposing, then, is an engaged rhetoric that begins with and returns to questions of purpose and audience. This might sound rather old-fashioned, but what I have in mind presumes a new understanding of the roles of the “actors and the acted upon,” an understanding that writers,
readers, and participants represented in our discourse all have a central stake in the outcome of professional discourse. Thus, I am arguing that all parties involved—whether they be the ones producing the writing (the scholar, researcher, teacher), consuming the writing (professional peers, graduate students, policy makers, and, at times, parents and community members), or the ones being written about (students, teachers, writers at work)—have a keen interest and central stake in the discourse. All parties, I argue, need to have a strong voice in the material outcomes of professional discourse because it may implicate and have an impact on them in some fashion. Such a process of shared, or, more likely, fiercely negotiated authority is certainly going to be messy and complex, but it is one that can demystify professional practice (one of Hindman’s goals), effect material change, and contribute to civic and social justice. One way to address this complex, rich, and potentially conflict-laden area is to attend to ethics in all aspects of our professional practice.

Ethical theories ask us to look systematically at the potential outcomes for all stakeholders involved, to treat others with dignity and respect, to recognize the humanity of all human beings, and to apply the same principles to everyone (that is, not to make exceptions for ourselves). These principles can be very helpful in an engaged rhetoric, one that attends to the material consequences and outcomes of our discourse, one that aims to bring about social change and social justice, all the while being aware that we cannot simply impose our values on others and that we need to build genuine partnerships with all members in our community and especially with those who have been disenfranchised. That is, attention to ethics, particularly as articulated by feminist and other activist scholars, demands that we collaborate with those who have experienced social injustice by asking them about their needs, goals, and hopes, as well as about the changes they deem necessary for creating a more just society.

I say ethical theories in the plural because postmodern scholars have come to recognize that one ethical approach does not fit all situations, that ethical principles always depend on the context, and that there is danger in imposing our values, goals, or sense of what’s right on others. But that does not mean that we have to fall into ethical relativism. I suggest that we can arrive at a process of sound decision making by following a number of ethical research principles that I have described in greater detail in *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research*. Among these principles are the following:
• asking research questions that acknowledge and validate participants’ experiences
• collaborating with participants as much as possible so that growth and learning can be mutually beneficial, interactive, and cooperative
• analyzing how social, historical, and cultural factors shape the research site as well as participants’ goals, values, and experiences
• analyzing how the researchers’ identity, experience, training, and theoretical framework shape the research agenda, data analysis, and findings
• correcting androcentric norms by calling into question what has been considered “normal” and what has been regarded as “deviant”
• taking responsibility for the representation of others in research reports by assessing probable and actual effects on different audiences
• acknowledging the limitations of and contradictions inherent in research data, as well as alternative interpretations of that data. (4–5)

Of course, these principles offer no guarantee that ethical research and ethical action will result from any given scholarly work. However, these principles do go a long way toward instituting some “checks and balances” because they ask researchers to take a number of critical actions: to consider the outcomes for all participants involved; to make conscious decisions about their choice of research questions, choice of participants, and level of involvement; to articulate and justify the reasons for their choices; to situate themselves in their work by locating their values, their background, and their identity in their work; and to engage in a continual cycle of revision, reflection, and reinterpretation as their work unfolds.

**Engaged Scholarship**

Let me point briefly to one example of what I consider to represent an effective embodied and engaged rhetoric: an article published recently in *CCC*. In “Bi, Butch, and Bar Dyke: Pedagogical Performances of Class, Gender, and Sexuality,” Michelle Gibson, Martha Marinara, and Deborah Meem describe how their physical appearances perform gender and are read and negotiated when they interact with students, colleagues, peers, partners, and the larger community. Importantly, the authors explore how readings of their bodies/identities have real material consequences in their professional and personal lives. For instance, Meem describes how her “butch self-representation” affects her interactions with others in the academy. She explains that as “a butch or masculine woman,” she projects “a ‘lesbian’ persona without formally coming out.” Therefore, she explains, she is often recruited as the “token dyke” (81, 82). Once,
when asked to be filmed for a television broadcast, she decided that she needed to come out formally to her students, and she found that they were neither surprised nor (visibly) offended, having assumed her to be a lesbian all along. Meem observes that her appearance may make it easy for her at times to broach discussion of gender, sexual identity, and sexual orientation in the classroom. Further, she observes that “students and faculty see my butchness as powerful, especially as contrasted with femme experience, which is mostly invisible” (82). Thus, Meem’s embodiment of gender has real consequences in her professional life, and her argument, interwoven with autobiographical examples, serves to illustrate the material consequences that arise from how bodies are read and interpreted by others.

Gibson and Marinara, the other two contributors to this article, who self-identify as a femme lesbian and a bisexual respectively, further complicate our understanding of how gender is embodied. Gibson and Marinara note that because their sexual identities remain largely unmarked, they face greater challenges when they decide to come out or when they are confronted with heterosexist comments (because others assume they are straight), yet they also enjoy greater safety from harassment and discrimination when they decide not to reveal facets of their identity. Unlike Meem, however, they cannot easily rely on the markers of authority/power that Meem has learned to use to her advantage because of how others interpret her embodiment of gender. This article serves as a powerful example of what an embodied and engaged rhetoric can accomplish because all three contributors show how they embody gender roles in different ways and how these embodiments affect their daily lives and continuous negotiations of identity.

Engaged Teaching
What might an engaged rhetoric of teaching look like? How do we teach students to write while also helping them to engage with the world, realize that the use of language, and writing in particular, has material consequences and can effect change in the world? One way that I approach this question is by introducing students to ethical theories as a rhetorical framework for decision making. A focus on ethics in the teaching of writing, I suggest, invites students to look closely at how rhetorical strategies shape the decision-making processes in the world of culture, politics, and business. Ethical theories, similar to rhetorical theories, provide a framework for making two important moves: making critical decisions when conflicts of interest are at stake, and attending to the
material conditions—and consequences—of decision making. Again, I am speaking of ethical theories in the plural because there is no one theory that fits all situations. That alone is often a revelation to my students.

When I introduce utilitarian theories (which, in oversimplified terms, concern themselves with outcomes of actions in terms of achieving the greatest good for the greatest number), students readily recognize this strategy as a decision-making tool frequently used by government, communities, and institutions. And it quickly becomes a favorite theory among students (although they tend to analyze cases only long enough to determine the greatest good for themselves or for the group with whom they identify). Upon further discussion, however, students come to understand that utilitarianism is a much more complex approach to decision making. In fact, it demands an analysis not only of primary stakeholders (those directly affected by a decision), but also of secondary stakeholders (those further removed from the immediate action, but who may be affected nevertheless). In addition, it demands an analysis of the surrounding environment and community, including what is called "spillover effects or externalities," such as effects on the environment, the infrastructure, the web of human relations, and so on (Boatright 14). Finally, it demands an analysis of both short-term and long-term consequences (which, in turn, requires complex research and projections to be useful). Considering outcomes for all stakeholders, not only some, can be an important learning experience for students when they first encounter ethical theories. Likewise, I want to suggest, it can serve as an important reminder for scholars across the disciplines. Scholars, just like students, can easily be tempted to focus on their own interests first, and those of other stakeholders second.  

Once we have discussed utilitarianism in class, we move on to ethical theories that focus on duties and rights, not consequences. Here, too, students are asked to put aside their own interests and to examine whether all people involved in a given case are treated with dignity and respect, as autonomous human beings. This principle, too, challenges students to examine closely how they assess situations and make decisions. After examining cases from a perspective of rights and duties, we move on to ethical theories that examine fairness and justice, especially the distribution of burdens as well as benefits across society. Here, for instance, we often begin by talking about the larger, long-term consequences that business decisions can have on community relations, the environment, and even global politics. We end up discussing topics as diverse as
ecological racism (the fact that sites of pollution, such as landfills and chemical plants, tend to be built in neighborhoods with poor, nonwhite populations) and labor exploitation (of migrant workers, for instance), and we talk about our own complicity in many such unfair practices.

Finally, we examine ethical theories grounded in notions of community, empathy, and caring—the theories most often associated with feminist ethics. Feminist scholars have long realized that ethical theories are context-dependent and culturally bound, that “one size does not fit all,” and that much depends on the context—the cultural and educational background, race, gender, and generation of those involved in ethical decision making. Feminists have taught us to think in more complex, dialectical and caring ways about ethical dilemmas (for example, the theories of Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, and the Mary Belenky collaborative come to mind here); they emphasize that caring, empathy, emotion, and pathos are key components of developing ethical approaches. In class discussion, we talk about actions that we would take if we took the interests of others first, if we found ourselves in the role of a trusted guardian or friend. The ethical frameworks through which students examine different cases over a semester shift dramatically, leading to new considerations, to new ways of seeing the same phenomenon, and, at times, to innovative ideas for solving social, cultural, and business problems. This brief description, I hope, illustrates how the study of ethics can provide a rich theoretical and rhetorical framework for the teaching of writing. Moreover, it can teach students to reflect systematically on their decision-making process and on the material outcomes of decisions they make as writers, future employees (or employers), and citizens.

An engaged rhetoric of professional practice, as I envision it, begins with an embodied rhetoric, but it does not end there. It asks us, as scholars, to consider the material consequences of our work in all aspects of our professional lives—pedagogy, scholarship, theory, administration, community service, and the many other aspects of professional involvement in which compositionists regularly engage. An engaged rhetoric challenges us to think about our embodiment as scholars and teachers, to engage in the world, and to work toward greater social justice and change.

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Notes

1. For an exemplary collection of essays examining literacy in a larger, social context, see Mahiri.

2. Since I teach at a business college, I ask students to write about and analyze business cases. I have also used this approach in other settings where students propose actions for situations that affect their community, place of work, or society at large.

3. There are many examples of studies in which researchers ignored, belittled, or violated the interests of their participants because they put their own interest above those they studied. Examples of unethical research can be found across all fields of study. I have briefly surveyed such research in my introductory chapter to *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research.*

Works Cited


Why Distrust the Very Goals with Which You Began?

Gary A. Olson

All of us to some degree worry about change, especially if that change seems to affect practices that we have engaged in for a long time and thus are very comfortable with. That's understandable, but it often is counterproductive in that such fear can prevent us from moving forward, from developing more productive ways of conceptualizing a practice. I do that to myself every time I balk at learning the next new development in computer technology, but I try to keep reminding myself that change, learning new ways to look at something, often provides huge dividends. That's why it saddens me to hear all the resistance to and mischaracterization (unintentional, I am sure) of post-process theory. In fact, this was an issue in several of the presentations I attended at a recent conference, and it is an issue in practically every critique of post-process