

Teaching Communication in, for, and about an Online World

G. Jon Hall Online GIFT Forum 20th Anniversary Panel
Iowa Communication Association Conference, Des Moines, September 27, 2024
Dale Cyphert. Professor Emerita, University of Northern Iowa

Here's my position statement: Online technologies have evolved over the past twenty years, and it's time to shift our instruction from teaching communication *with* online technology toward teaching communication *as* online technology. So, let me explain, and I'll try to be brief!!

Evolving rhetorical norms are old news,¹ but we're dealing now with a pace so fast it's better described as a revolution.²

Each transition from orality to literacy to print culture to the media age was shorter than the previous, but now it's craziness. In 2000 business, legal, and government speakers were just figuring out how to use presentation technology in appropriate and effective ways.³ By 2014, online, multiuser communication tools were ubiquitous⁴ and required for career success.⁵ Now, AI enhanced communication—a technology released less than two years ago⁶—is required for employment in a majority of U.S. businesses.⁷ Who knows what might be invented in the next six months—or six days?

As instructors, we have good reasons to neglect changing rhetorical norms.

Pedagogy is inherently conservative. Our job is to train students to conform to current rhetorical rules.⁸ While some of us also study or even critique the processes of cultural discipline,⁹ the teaching typically comes first.¹⁰ We are, of course, adjusting our lessons to reflect changing norms, but our job is to roll up slowly as the rear guard of the revolution.

However, I think it's clear that the future is not about teaching *with* online tools; it's about teaching civic communication as a mediated, visual, disseminated, diverse, performative endeavor.

Our field has a LONG history of using technology,¹¹ and today's students are immersed in gaming, online forums/social media, remote learning, video production and dissemination, either as culturally relevant instructional materials or simply as learning motivators. But using technology to demonstrate and reinforce existing norms¹² is not the same as teaching the emerging norms of a technological, mediated, diverse rhetorical era. Three normative shifts are well researched and easy to see around us:

1) Social relationships that define *ethos* are more inclusive and diverse.

Male, landowning Greek orators developed *ethos* in very, very different ways from social media influencers. We've made some adjustments in our teaching. Women are no longer taught to speak like men, as I was as a high school debater, but recommendations for credible content, dress, language, and style remain solidly middle/professional class.¹³ Even online, students engage in zoom meetings that emulate classroom discussions, meanwhile UNI recruiters complain about the lack of professionalism in channel choice, real-time chat, decision support systems, and mediated problem-solving discussion.¹⁴

2) Epistemological norms that define *logos* have shifted from literate Western Analytics toward feminine, cross-cultural, and post-literate “electracy.”¹⁵

Cognitive sciences now realize that *Pathos*, the wild horse that Plato tried so hard to control, governs how we process images, comprehend social media scrolls, and respond to AI chat bots,¹⁶ but tests of verbal evidence remain the gold standard in our classrooms. Media literacy is framed as a tool to prevent students from being persuaded by their emotional responses or collective/cultural wisdom, and never introduced to norms of social knowledge that function as information literacy in the contemporary work environment.¹⁷

3) Performative norms that define *decorum* in the public sphere now address technological competence, electronic mediation, and digital dissemination.

Presentation slides and even data visualizations are still framed as “visual aids¹⁸ that illustrate ideas, rather than critical tools of invention,¹⁹ communication, and dissemination.²⁰ Meanwhile, online classroom “participation” typically consists of asynchronous written messages rather than the performative meetups, flashmobs, crowdsourcing and crowdfunding, livestreaming, virtual town halls, and virtual sit-ins that are the tools of contemporary civic life.

Granted, this isn’t easy. The textbooks haven’t been written yet, and the research is all over the place, but we have to start somewhere! This G. Jon Hall Forum might be the place. No longer Great Ideas for Teaching communication *with* online tools, but instead, Great Ideas for Teaching communication *in an* online age.

¹ Edwin Black, "The mutability of rhetoric," in *Rhetoric in transition: Studies in the nature and uses of rhetoric*, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980); Douglas Ehninger, "On systems of rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1971); John Waite Bower and Donovan J. Ochs, *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1971). The notion of rhetorical eras was a major theoretical insight that came in response to the cultural changes of post-Colonial, Postmodern trends in Western culture as well as the performative revolution of the 1970s, but we seem to have ignored the fundamental point: rhetorical norms, genre and processes continuously evolve in response to internal and external pressures on the community.

² Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The printing press as an agent of change*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1979); Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an electronic age: The transformation of political speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Harold A. Innis, *Empire and communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: The extensions of man* (New York: Mentor: New American Library, 1964); Cara A. Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang, "'Sighting' the public: Iconoclasm and public sphere theory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 4 (2004). It took a thousand years before the ancient modes of rhetoric were reframed by literacy but only a few hundred for the printing press to transform Western culture, and just a few decades for the media age to transform the public sphere. Computer-aided communication technologies transformed business, political, and civic communication in less than a decade.

³ Cyphert, D., "Presentation Technology in the Age of Electronic Eloquence: From Visual Aid to Visual Rhetoric," *Communication Education*, 56.2 (2007): 168-192; Cyphert, D., "The Orality of Business: Acting on the Edge of Literate Culture," *Explorations in Media Ecology*, 3.1 (2004): 41-46; Cyphert, D., "PowerPoint and the Evolution of Electronic Eloquence: Evidence from the Contemporary Business Presentation." *American Communication Journal*,

11. 2 (2009); Dale Cyphert, "Presentation technology in the age of electronic eloquence: From visual aid to visual rhetoric," *Communication Education* 56, no. 2 (2007).

⁴ Teams, Slack, and Discord are a few of the myriad proprietary software packages developed for specific business, industry, or civic applications.

⁵ Functional literacy with Kanban, ERP, and manufacturing software is increasingly critical in blue-collar positions, as well...not to mention the ubiquitous HRIS systems that now handle payroll, scheduling, and HR benefits.

⁶ ChatGPT was launched on November 30, 2022.

⁷ Kevin J. Delaney, "As employers embrace AI, workers fret--and seek input," *Time*, 2024. "66% of business leaders surveyed...said they wouldn't hire someone without AI skills."

⁸ Barry Brummett, "Rhetorical theory as heuristic and moral: A pedagogical justification," *Communication Education* 33, no. 2 (1984).

⁹ Cyphert, D., "A Developmental Framework for Professional Communication Competence: Language Awareness in Context," in Darics, E., editor, *Language Awareness in Professional Practice: Changing Perceptions about Soft Skills*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 160-182.

¹⁰ Cyphert, D. "Taking a Rhetorical Perspective on Emerging Communication Practice: Pedagogy as Theory-Building Scholarship." *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 87, 1 (2024): 100-121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294906231194940>

¹¹ CRTNET was the first non-technical listserv, started in 1985, and ten years later it was common to require electronic discussion posts in a communication course. By 2003, an estimated 150,000 online courses had been established around the world and the Blackboard Learning System staff announced that 40,000 instructors were teaching 150,000 online courses to more than 6 million students, across 55 countries. By 2004, ICA had started the G Jon Hall online GIFTS forum.

¹² Based on Quality Matters review criteria, online materials, discussion tools, assignments, and grading criteria largely focus on students' ability to present a coherent (by Western standards) written position.

¹³ Cyphert, D., "Assertively Well-Groomed: Perception and Reality of Professional Women" presented at the Association for Business Communication Annual International Conference, Virtual, October 2020.

¹⁴ Cyphert, D., Dodge, Elena N., Holke-Farnam, C., Lee, W. E., Rosol, S., "Communication Activities in the 21st Century Business Environment," *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 82,2 (2019): 169-201. DOI 10.1177/2329490619831279. A survey of entry-level supervisors named various technical and online communication skills.

¹⁵ David Grant, my colleague at UNI (along with others), describes the evolution of in terms of organizing principles: "ethos was the organizational principle of orality, logos the principle of literacy, and pathos is/will be the organizing principle of electracy." Electracy is a term coined to G. L. Ulmer, *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy* (New York: Longman, 2003). to describe skills required for communication competence in the era of electronic media, comparable to "literacy" as the skills required for the print era.

¹⁶ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023); Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organizations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997); Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, "Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science* 185 (1974); Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Kenneth Cukier, *Big Data: A revolution*

that will transform how we live, work, and think. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013). Western rationalism made no sense to Lakota philosophers in the 18th century, has limited value in describing actual human behavior, and simply can't keep up with the non-linear equations and processing speed of data-crunching computers.

¹⁷ Cyphert, D. and Lyle, S.P., "Employer Expectations of Information Literacy: Identifying the Skills Gap," in *Information Literacy: Research and Collaboration across Disciplines*. D'Angelo, B., Jamieson, S., Maid, B., and Walker, J.R. editors. Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearing House and University Press of Colorado, 2016. 53-79.

¹⁸ Todd Frobish, "Jamieson meets Lucas: Eloquence and Pedagogical model(s) in *The Art of Public Speaking*," *Communication Education* 49, no. 3 (2000)..2000: Frobish article; Cyphert, D., "Visual Aids vs. Visual Rhetorics: Lessons from the PowerPoint Controversy," Basic Course Division, National Communication Association Annual Convention, Atlanta, November 2001. By 2000, public discourse in the U.S. exhibited the rhetorical norms of a media age, but the best-selling textbooks, and thus presumably most university curricula, continued to teach traditional elements of Modernist, oratorical eloquence, dismissing presentation technology as "bells and whistles" with little relevance to the rhetorical principles.

¹⁹ Dale Cyphert, "Theorizing the Role of Big Data Visualization: Moving Visuals from Delivery to Invention," in *Theory and Praxis in the Business Communication Classroom*, ed. K. Getchell and Paula Lentz (Routledge, 2018); Cyphert, D., "Big Data Visualization: What Do Our Students Need to Know?" presented at the Association for Business Communication Annual International Conference, Dun Laoghaire, Republic of Ireland, October 2017; Cyphert, D., "Visual Persuasions: Presentations in the Era of Big Data," Whittle, L. A. (Ed) *Proceedings of the 84th Annual Conference*. Association for Business Communication, Detroit (October 2019).

²⁰ When I gave the G. Jon Hall lecture in 2011, technology supported interaction across fully networked, distributed organizations, but group communication was—and still is—taught strictly in terms of small, zero-history, face-to-face groups.