Cultural Rhetorics: A Faculty Workshop

1. What does the term “cultural rhetoric” mean?

2. What language backgrounds do our students have?

3. Where do students with different language backgrounds get general support at NIU?

4. How can we help students “code switch” between cultural and academic rhetorics?

5. How can we respond to students with different cultural rhetorics?
1. What does the term “cultural rhetoric” mean?

♦ A FUNCTIONAL DEFINITION of cultural rhetoric includes answers to the following questions:

A. ETHOS—What language does a writer choose to represent herself, e.g., authorship of a document, education, profession, class, accomplishments, affiliations, level of expertise, ethnicity, gender, faith, or other markers (or effacements) of the self?

B. READER AWARENESS—How does a writer indicate her relationship to readers, e.g., diction, tone, acknowledgement, formality, sensitivity to readers' expectations, attention to inter-relational nuances of the writing task?

C. CONVENTIONS—What formatting conventions does the writer use, e.g., organization, sentence and paragraph length, prose style, visual aids, citation style, requirements for identifying authorship?

D. PURPOSE—How does the writer express her purpose, e.g., level of directness, strategies for locating and repeating expression of purpose, document’s actual “social use,” expectation of readers’ response?

E. PERSUASIVE TECHNIQUES—What techniques does the writer use to persuade readers, e.g., stylistic devices, references to sources, personal credentials, endorsements, proposals, assistance, suggestions, new information, warnings, solutions to problems, offers, emotional appeals, images?

N.B. Go to Anne Raimes’ online “ESL Center” to see how to detect and address typical error patterns for ESL students from different language backgrounds:
http://college.hmco.com/english/raimes/keys_writers/2e/students/eslcentr/eslintr.html

♦ AMERICAN ACADEMIC WRITING often emphasizes conventions—arrangement and style.

Arrangement
- Writer uses an introduction, encouraging readers’ interest and receptiveness to an issue
- Writer provides a statement and/or brief discussion of common knowledge about the issue
- Writer divides the issue into its parts (analysis) and adds new or commonly unknown information, or indicates unidentified relationships among the parts (synthesis)
- Writer declares a stance and confirms her reasons for adopting the stance
- Writer acknowledges and refutes other stances, perspectives, or interpretations, explaining why
- Writer concludes, usually with a summary, a set of questions for further discussion, or an appeal to the readers’ sense of logic, emotions, or ethics

Style
- Writer usually emphasizes an “objective” stance, draws support from facts, current disciplinary knowledge, testimony of experts; often avoids critiquing the interests that sources serve
- Writer avoids referring too openly to herself or her opinions, often preferring third person to convey a sense of disinterestedness and using active rather than passive tense
- Writer uses plain, nonliterary word choices and concise sentences, but also employs specialized or technical vocabulary as required by different academic disciplines
- Writer meets grammar, punctuation, and format, as expected in “Edited American English”

♦ A CHALLENGE from the national Conference on College Composition and Communication on “Students’ Right to their Own Language,” http://www.ncte.org/cccc/positions/right_to_language.shtml: We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.
WRITING SAMPLES: The two writers below were assigned to write a “bad news” memo to an aggressive but bright young man in an advertising company who works poorly with women. He has volunteered to work on a new-product ad campaign with an important client. He once had a dispute with her during a similar project (he dumped a glass of water on her). Each writer must assume to be a manager who is refusing him the request. List three differences you find between the cultural rhetorics of the two writers.

MEMO #1:
To: Bernard Jorgenson <bjorg@maxgrove.com>
From: I_____ B _____ <ib@hotmail.com>
Subject: Frosted Bran Nuggets Campaign

Bernie,

It is a great privilege to have you as an excellent employee in our management staff. Else we appreciate your interest in leading the design team on the new Kellogg's Frosted Bran Nuggets campaign.

The key to our company's successes is to plan every campaign comprehensively. It includes matching the personal in the most efficient way. Since your and Ms. Helmsford's work style poorly match, your request cannot be approved at this time. Alternatively, you might find motivating to direct the design team on the new Oat Bran Campaign, which is scheduled on March 30, 2003. Please contact Nancy Stewart at The Marketing Department for further information at nstew@maxgrove.com.

We value your eagerness to contribute to the Maxwell-Grove Inc. and look forward to employing your remarkable professional skills in the Oat Bran Campaign and other projects.

I_____ B _____
Vice President of Advertising
Maxwell-Grove Inc.
<ib@hotmail.com>

MEMO #2:
Date: Sun. 16 Feb 2003
To: Bernard Jorgenson <bjorg@mangrove.com>
From: R__ M__ <rmxxx@maxgrove.com>
Subject: Turn down Lead Request

Bernie:

Thank you for taking the initiative and getting involved. We have received your request to lead the design team on the new Kellogg’s Frosted Bran Nuggets campaign. We are extremely pleased with the work you have done in the past.

Keeping Kellogg’s as a client of ours is very important to the success of our company. It has been decided that Sue Jones is going to lead the Kellogg’s Frosted Bran Nuggets campaign. Sue Jones has developed a successful relationship with Ms. Helmsfield. Company policy requires us to use the candidate who had the most success with Kellogg’s in the past.

Your creative and energetic attitude is greatly appreciated. We look forward to using you on the next and upcoming project.

R__ M__
Vice President of Advertising
Maxwell-Grove Inc.
<rmxxx@maxwellgrove.com>
2. What language backgrounds do our students have?

♦ CULTURAL RHETORICS ABOUND, each with its own unique and complex elements. If professors get acquainted with the elements that distinguish the differences between American academic rhetoric and other cultural rhetorics, they can help writers combine the strengths of those rhetorics. This approach is more controversial and requires greater effort, but they are more effective in helping writers improve. A list describing characteristics of a few cultural rhetorics common to NIU students follows.

African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

**Arrangement**
- Writer uses direct address, conversational approach. These two are not necessarily the same, but often co-occur; speaking directly to audience; also, can be a kind of call/response
- Writer draws on narrative sequencing; dramatic retelling of a story implicitly linked to topic, to make a point; reporting events dramatically acted out or narrated
- Writer initiates a call/response by returning repetitiously to key phrases in an assignment as a structural device, checking for constant connection with the question or text at hand; a repeated invocation of the language from the prompt, manifested as a refrain
- Writer engages in topic association—a series of associated anecdotal segments, linked implicitly to particular topical event or theme, but with no explicit statement of the overall theme
- Writer employs testifying, bearing witness to the righteousness of a condition or situation

**Style**
- Writer chooses rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language; use of metaphors, significations, vivid imagery
- Writer draws from proverbs, aphorisms, Biblical verses
- Writer uses sermonic tone reminiscent of traditional Black church rhetoric, especially in vocabulary, imagery, metaphor
- Writer includes references to cultural items/icons that usually carry symbolic meaning in African American communities
- Writer demonstrates ethnolinguistic idioms, use of language that bears particular meaning in African American communities
- Writer engages in verbal inventiveness, unique nomenclature
- Writer’s language reflects cultural values, community consciousness; expressions of concern for the development of African Americans; concern for community, not just individuals
- Writer shows field dependency—involvement with and immersion in events and situations; personalizing phenomena; lack of distance from topics and subjects
- Writer uses tonal semantics (repetition of sounds or structures to emphasize meaning)
- Writer engages in signifying—use of indirection to make points; may employ oppositional logic, overstatement, understatement, and/or reliance on reader’s knowledge of implicit assumption that is taken to be common knowledge (shared worldview)
- Writer demonstrates intentional use of fragments for emphasis, a strategy of African American clergy
- Writer may include sounding off, getting her own back by telling others about mistreatment

Chinese rhetoric

**Arrangement**
- Writer provides a series of concrete examples to make a point but may neither state the point nor relate the examples to each other
- Writer does not blurt out the main idea but rather builds up to it by discussing ideas which are related to the main idea but which will not be pursued
- Writer does not provide a conclusion but leaves the reader to sense the conclusion

**Style**
- Writer provides justification for statements based on communal wisdom and past authority
- Writer seeks to be obscure with an audience to establish scholarly authority
• Writer shares many bits of memorized teachings from the past
• Writer avoids verbosity or repetition

**Japanese rhetoric**

**Arrangement**
- Writer follows four-part organization
  a. begin an argument, but don’t state it explicitly
  b. develop the argument
  c. return overtly to the baseline theme, then turn to a subtheme that has a connection, but not a directly connected association
  d. bring all the parts together with a conclusion or summary or both
- Writer works from specifics to general

**Style**
- Writer relates textual information to personal experience
- Writer tries to make prose aesthetically acceptable (engaging the emotions through beauty or surprise)

**Middle Eastern rhetoric**

**Arrangement**
- Writer prizes coordination, parallelism, and balancing of ideas over hierarchy and subordination
- Writer seeks multiple ways to say the same thing

**Style**
- Writer uses words for effect rather than precision or meaning
- Writer incorporates flamboyant imagery
- Writer uses exaggeration and overstatement

**Spanish rhetoric**

**Arrangement**
- Writer engages in digressions, asides, and attempts to link the main argument to other issues
- Writer explores subtopics at substantial length

**Style**
- Writer provides scattered examples and data, concentrating more on generalizing underlying patterns that link them
- Writer works toward leisurely elegance, especially in introductions

**Native American Rhetoric.**

**Arrangement:**
- Writer addresses readers directly, to create sense of oral, ceremonial context
- Writer uses tales to convey tribal beliefs, values, standards, or prohibitions
- Writer uses myths to transport reader to strange, fantastic realms
- Writer recites tribal history or tribal relationships
- Writer interpolates parts of poetry and song

**Style:**
- Writer employs dramatic language
- Writer incorporates frequent humor to parody or satirize human behavior
- Writer refers frequently to natural world

**American Sign Language.**

**Arrangement:**
- Writer uses reduplicative paragraph and sentence structure rather than a linear organization to clarify meaning
- Writer makes frequent use of shorter sentences, prize conciseness and directness
- Writer places repeated emphasis on key nouns or verbs, sometimes omitting (or adding) articles, prepositions, or inflections
Style:
- Writer prefers simple, unambiguous words and avoids idiomatic language
- Writers may identify herself as part of a community that shares the same language, cultural values, history, and social life
- Writer "fronts" her identity to affirm that self-identity is more salient than an essay prompt or assignment
- Writer may use language that challenges biases toward the auditory mode of communication

♦ WRITING SAMPLE: The following is an excerpt from a draft on the origins of the Chicago housing projects. The student was to choose a topic in African American history that has had a significant impact on African Americans’ lives (urban or rural). What elements of the rhetoric of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) can be identified? How do these AAVE rhetorical traditions influence the way the student imagines and approaches the task of writing history? What are some other ways of responding to this part of the student’s draft?

CHICAGO PROJECTS
Land of the free, promise land, and equal opportunity were factors not existent to the Black community in early America. Although, today Black Americans legally have access to the above, segregation still exists between black and white societies. I have noticed this in high schools, college campuses, and especially poor black neighborhoods. Today, many poor black Americans remain disadvantaged and suffer by being isolated into a ghetto home. Ghetto life encounters many hardships including how people are forced to live and face daily struggles and constant battles.

The formation of a black ghetto resulted from blacks migrating from the south after the Civil War¹. White people were considered a group of “have’s” and the Blacks made up the “have-nots”. Racial discrimination was a major reason why ghettos emerged, due to white hostility; as the population was booming at the turn of the century, white people did not want to have Negroes as neighbors². By 1920 Negro ghettos were fully developed³.

Generally, a black ghetto consists of low income, bad housing, and poor living conditions. William Wilson defines a ghetto as “low aspirations, poor education, family instability, illegitimacy, unemployment, crime, drug addiction, and alcoholism, frequent illness and early death”. When black ghettos were created, Blacks were not U.S. citizens, they were former slave laborers, or ancestors of slave laborers, and had little or not job skills; whereas white ghettos usually consisted of immigrated Europeans with citizenship, and were not origins of slavery and had some sort of job skills.

¹Glasgow, 35
²Glasgow, 33
³Wilson, 142

Professor’s comments: The reader has no idea of what city is the focus, nor what particular black community is the focus. What are the years of the study (that should be in the title)? What are the particular issue(s) you plan to discuss in the paper (introduction)?… This paper is to be HISTORICAL, not discussing problems in the year 2000. That’s not historical, that’s SOCIOLOGICAL. You need to rework this entire paper.

Please provide some alternative comments:
3. **Where do students with different language backgrounds get general support at NIU?**

♦ **COMMON CONTEXTS** for writing and reading support at NIU include the following programs. Note the continuities and the discontinuities of support.

**ENGL 102-103P:**
- Diverse students can examine how dialects function in a variety of community contexts besides their own
- Diverse students can use ethnographic and “linguistically conscious” writing to develop a scholarly ethos, while maintaining their home or community identity
- Diverse students must make choices about rendering dialects orthographically or in Edited American English for readers of *Contemporary Voices*, the student-authored course text
- Diverse students can become aware of their own and others’ rhetorical agenda and can experiment with creating multicultural community
- Diverse students have the opportunity in an academic setting to work closely with other readers who may need or ask them to explain and translate features of their dialects into different rhetorical forms
- Instructors as well as all students become more conscious of diverse language backgrounds and their potential for scaffolding and forming interdiscursive links (see #4, below)

**FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION:**
- Diverse students may choose topics that would be of interest to them
- Diverse students can develop a rhetorical stance that represents their community’s perspective and deeply held values, and other students will read/respond to their drafts
- Students can read culturally diverse writers in the course texts or in other sources and possibly gain sensitivity to the factors relevant to a writer’s cultural ethos
- Diverse students may feel as if they are “auxiliary” to a white, middle-class audience of readers that the course texts presumably target—leading them to seek sources of authority more compatible with their own rhetorical traditions in their writing (e.g., the Bible)
- Experienced instructors might be alert to scaffolding opportunities for students, if they specify elements of style, audience analysis, and other key rhetorical features of a writing assignment
- Experienced instructors may help students position their use of cultural rhetorics in their writing, affirming students' social and cultural identities as they acquire academic literacy
- Inexperienced or even experienced instructors may resort to the deficit model when responding to students’ writing, assuming that they are fully addressing multicultural needs by including diverse writers in the course texts

**WRITING CENTER:**
- Diverse students can bring their personal perspectives to their writing tasks
- Diverse students can use their cultural rhetorics to interpret assignments and break the codes of very challenging texts with the help of tutors
- Diverse students can use their own language to help interpret what they read and explain what they write
- Diverse students’ perception of their academic ethos and audience can change dramatically (one student demonstrated these goal statements for a progression of Writing Center sessions: “to know how bad I write and learn ways of writing better”; “to help me understand what I need to correct”; “to make sure my paper is readable”; “to make sure others can read and understand my paper”)
- Professors can clarify disciplinary conventions and formats to Writing Center staff, so tutors can explain to students what is expected in assignments from class to class
- Professors can work with Writing Center staff to design assignments that accommodate a variety of learning styles and cultural backgrounds
- Tutors may overlook heuristic value of cultural rhetorics in deference to professor's expectations

**DISCIPLINARY COURSES:**
- Diverse students can enroll in courses that are explicitly designed around or include multicultural issues
Diverse students can read the work of prominent multicultural writers in many disciplinary venues, although texts predominantly reflect academic language and Edited American English.

Diverse students can practice developing a scholarly ethos in writing tasks.

Diverse students may--or may not--receive a clear definition of discipline-specific written conventions from professors.

Diverse students may be required to do revisions as a result of professors’ written feedback; sometimes the professor may insist that the student go to the Writing Center to get help, but going to the Writing Center may not be mentioned as a resource and may be left to the student’s own initiative.

Diverse students may feel that professors’ response to their writing is substantive and useful for revision, yet they may be made to feel their cultural rhetorics are deficient in comparison to Edited American English.

What are two ways you would advise a new faculty member to be proactive to help a struggling ESL or bilingual student in her class?

A.

B.

4. How can we help students “code switch” between cultural and academic rhetorics?

♦ “SCAFFOLDING” AND RECOGNIZING “INTERDISCURSIVE LINKS” represent two effective techniques toward helping students draw upon the strengths of their own cultural rhetorics and the disciplinary rhetorics of the academy. These two techniques provide the means for “code switching,” a linguistic term for the ability to move from one language system to another fluidly.

(1) “Scaffolding” is a technique whereby a student uses a known discourse form that internally organizes experience as “a heuristic for problem-solving that requires analogical reasoning” (Carol).

(2) Forming “interdiscursive links” is a technique where students make connections between their own discourse and academic writing, resulting in the construction of identities that can participate actively in multiple cultures (Gray-Rosendale and Gruber).

The following sample activities help students engage in scaffolding and forming interdiscursive links:

A. General activities

• Get students to conduct online dialogues with classmates, focusing on course material; require at least one contribution and one response to another.

• Ask students to conduct interviews, transcribe oral testimonials for projects.

• Encourage students to imitate popular publication formats that they read on their own (e.g., magazine articles, websites).

• Have students write “companion texts” that summarize, interpret, and question a lecture.

• Dictate instructions for students to write a brief review of specific points covered in a previous class; they turn in the dictation as well as the response.

• Ask students to write in contrasting genres and rhetorical situations (e.g., a memo and a personal letter on the same subject).

• Require students to work in small writing groups with a mix of those who have stronger and weaker skills in academic rhetorics (e.g., collaborative projects or peer reviews).
B. Types of activities that emphasize revision

- Have students define an important course concept in contrasting dictions: “textbook language” and their language; a few read aloud
- Get students to do reader analysis of a drafted assignment, e.g., who reads a case study? Why? What kinds of language, information, and structure do such readers expect? Tell students to turn in a list of changes they must make after their reader analysis
- Encourage students to write two or three different kinds of introductions or conclusions for a project; they evaluate which might be best
- Read aloud an assignment's instructions and ask students to write a 1-2 page discovery draft—what do they already know; what do they need to find out?
- Ask students to write and share "progress reports" with peers; students comment on finding sources, determining focus, verifying format and organization, incorporating special features (graphics, tables, other visual aids)
- Train students to respond to each other's drafted writing; their comments and questions can be based on how well a partner has followed assignment instructions, and what the partner still needs to do

C. Types of activities for working with sources

- Ask students to summarize an idea or concept you’ve just gone over—then ask them to compare it to what a classmate has also written; they comment on how summaries differ
- Ask students to read a key passage from their textbooks; they close the text, and one dictates an oral summary to a classmate, the other writes; they both go back to the text to check for accuracy
- Tell students to bring a source to class and defend why they’ll cite it for a project, specifying what parts they’ll cite; classmates must challenge or approve its use, explaining why
- Provide students with a successful example of a written project, and get them to identify what parts are the writer's original insights and what parts come from sources
- Pair students; one acts as a "recorder" and takes notes on how the other paraphrases a source she’s collected for a project; the recorder then checks the source and provides feedback on how accurately the paraphrase compares to the source; partners switch roles
- Get students in groups of three to conduct an Internet search, where each locates a source; each evaluates the usefulness and reliability of the others’ sources; they then write up their findings as a short report

What is one activity that you would try—or already do in class—to help students discern the difference between “home language” and academic diction? Why?

5. How can we respond to students with different cultural rhetorics?

♦ WRITING SAMPLE: The following draft reflects an assignment in Rhetoric and Composition, where the students were instructed to listen to conversations, watch TV, listen to a radio program, or look through a newspaper to find one argument that they believed was effective and honest—and another that was ineffective, flawed, or maybe even unethical. They had to summarize the two arguments. Then, they had to discuss how the better argument drew on effective techniques, e.g., Socratic dialogue, definition, cause/effect, induction (which predicts), deduction (which draws conclusions from facts and evidence), analogy, evaluation based on clear criteria. Next, they had to decide—and explain—that the weaker argument was flawed, and if it resorted to types fallacious reasoning, e.g., hasty generalizations, unrepresentative sampling, faulty comparisons, non sequitur, equivocations, post hoc ergo prompter hoc, falsely honorific or pejorative terms, or shifting criteria. They would be reading their drafts and eliciting comments from their classmates in small groups.
Student's Response: "Two Sides of a Coin"

Persuasion is the ever thirsty leech that sucks blood of human foolishness. Somehow we evolved into prospective fools, destroying our bodies with drugs and alcohol. And we die like fools afraid of what we cannot sence. And those among us who are evel stand on roof-tops of bazars and encourage us to remain half-wits.

Look at me my children. You can see me think. I must exist. I'm flesh and bone and spirit. And when I die I will seize to exist. Fear not hereafter. Live life now. For tomorrow you will die like fools.

And the man with his hanging beard and flowing robes hands down the fire stick and says

Look children, point the stick, release the soul and let loose the days of evil. Fear not death for today it is what we fight and die for.

And I like a fool stood by and agreed with words I thought good. Not realizing I was selling my soul to a man who had already given his to the devil. And all the time the wolf was screaming laughter at my face, he said,

Come with me children. Let us today kill for religion. Let the children run explosives tied to their chests to detonate beneath the tank.

Or better still, let them walk ahead to give the enemy marksman a chance to waist ammunition or to blow up any mine that lies in our way.

And when the battle was over, there were only the dead left. The blood like a dirty ink written on a clean sheet of paper, wanting to be removed. All that remained was the memory and all that stayed was the nightmare to follow.

And yet we did not learn, we waisted our tears and swore to revenge the blood with even more the next day.

And what did I fight for, I asked God. It could not have been religion. For religion makes us human, doesn't it?

No! cried the devil. Let me answer you. After all it was I all along. You fought for land to human adversary. You fought for a new world under my world order.

Yesterday I asked a friend of mine that he suppose one day he got married and in a few years had a child.

I asked him to imagine a child just torn from a womb, unprotected, fragile from a place as unknown to us as afterlife.

If their I was to appear before you and ask for your child in exchange of anything and everything he desired would he agree.

He replied no, and yet I said we do it everyday of our lives. Placing value over human life. Today it is worth the price of oil, tomorrow it could be anything. The beauty of human life is its pricelessness and no amount of persuasion should change that.

Some Questions

1. What has the student accomplished in this piece of writing?
2. In what format is the student writing?
3. What do you think is the student’s cultural rhetoric—and what do you learn about that cultural rhetoric?
4. How many arguments are in this piece, and who are the arguers?
5. What are the arguments?
6. How much of the assignment has the student addressed, and what did he miss?
7. What “cues” might the student have taken from the assignment’s instructions?
8. What questions would you ask the student (i.e., what do you want the student to teach you?)
9. What suggestions would you give the student?

♦ SUGGESTED READING: