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Rhetoric and teacher education

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on teacher education has drawn a sharp contrast between “top-down” and “teacher-directed” approaches to instructional reform. However, this article suggests that all forms of teacher education share a common ground: they are all inescapably rhetorical in nature, aimed at the persuasion of teachers. While reformers may attempt to deny such intentions, they cannot help but employ rhetoric in practice. By way of illustration, the author provides a case study of a reform project that seeks to “support” teachers rather than trying to exert power over them. Analysis reveals this to be an impossible ideal, one whose appearance can be maintained only by refusing to admit to contradictory motives. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Over a decade ago, writing in the very first issue of this journal, Robert Floden (1985) challenged his readers to rethink one of the core principles of scholarly discourse: educational researchers, he argued, should not always strive to present their findings in plain, neutral terms. Rather, when writing for an audience of teachers and school administrators, they ought to use accessible and attractive language. They should sacrifice the appearance of scientific neutrality, to some degree, in favor of a more widely appealing style, one that will induce practitioners to make good use of the data. In fact, Floden suggested that if educational researchers

wish to have a significant influence on those who work in schools, then they should turn, for guidance, to the practice of Rhetoric, the ancient art of persuasion.

The recommendation may sound odd, Floden admits, perhaps even a little frightening:

The thought that considerations of rhetoric are important in writing research reports may seem scandalous to some researchers. Rhetoric conjures up images of the Sophists and current associations with political propaganda and advertising. Reports of scientific studies of teaching are seen as neutral portrayals of research procedures, objective results, and the conclusions that can be logically derived from these results. (p. 28).

However, such anti-rhetorical prejudices are outdated, he argues. If we follow recent trends in

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linguistics, then we must acknowledge that rhetoric is everywhere, present in all of our discourse.¹ There can be no such thing as a “neutral portrayal”, since every utterance is directed toward having a desired influence on an audience: “Even the scientific style of writing itself is a rhetorical device which tends to persuade the reader that the events reported admit of only one interpretation” (p. 28).

Thirteen years later, Floden’s argument may not sound quite so scandalous. Today, many researchers would likely agree with his assertion that there can be no such thing as a purely objective, neutral form of communication. It is now commonly argued that language matters, that it filters our perceptions of the world and structures the ways that we interact with one another. As Lakoff and Johnson (1982) famously put it, we “live by” our metaphors (and other figures of speech); our conceptions of teaching are mediated, in subtle ways, by the words we choose. To speak of “coaching” one’s students, for example, implies a very different pedagogy than if one refers to “nurturing them”, or to “transmitting” knowledge to them.²

And yet, while there has been a recent surge of research into the language of educational experience, particularly into the metaphors and narratives of classroom practice (e.g., Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997; Connelly & Clandinin, 1996, 1994; Carter, 1995; Noddings & Witherell, 1991), very few

teacher educators have taken up Floden’s call to think of themselves as rhetors, engaged in the task of persuasion (for exceptions, see St. Maurice, 1991; Florio-Ruane, 1991). It has become common for scholars to focus on the ways that teachers’ language reflects and expresses their beliefs and understandings and prejudices, but there remains scant discussion of how one might use narrative, metaphor, and other tropes to influence teachers.³

Of course, this aversion to the arts of persuasion is not surprising. Not only does rhetoric remain, in common usage, a pejorative term (connoting dishonesty and manipulation), but the call to “persuade” teachers may sound like yet another example of the “top-down” thinking that has, for so many school reformers, fallen into disrepute (e.g., Davis & Sumara, 1997; Lieberman, 1996; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Cooper, 1991; Barritt & Marshall, 1990). Indeed, the current enthusiasm for “teacher-centered” approaches to reform would seem to preclude any serious efforts to encourage persuasive artistry in staff development. Case methodologies, for example, have lately received a great deal of attention in large part because they seem to displace the authority of teacher educators, giving teachers themselves more control over the staff development process (see Merseth, 1996; Harrington, 1994; Lord, 1994; Richardson, 1992; Richert, 1990).

In this paper, however, I wish to reiterate and extend Floden’s thesis: I agree that teacher educators ought to define their practice as explicitly rhetorical, not only in the writing of research reports, but in all of their interactions with teachers. To insist otherwise (especially to claim that “helping” or “supporting” teachers can be distinguished from “exerting power over” them), is to mislead oneself about the nature of one’s work. It is, moreover, to invoke a tired old prejudice against rhetoric, unfairly demonizing the act of persuasion.

¹ Donald Freeman (1996) gives an excellent overview of these trends. He recommends treating all language use as purposeful, aimed at having a desired effect in the world (rather than merely representing ideas and things). My own views on language and “representation” overlap in many ways with his, but I explore the issues from a different angle: he focuses on the analysis of teachers’ language, and I tend to focus on the production; he cites a tradition of scholarship in Linguistics; I tend to cite a tradition of scholarship in Rhetoric and English Studies. For accounts of how the study of Rhetoric came to have such low status, for most of the 20th century, and of how it has begun to recover its former prestige, I recommend Conley (1994) and Barilli (1989).

² Though, of course, teachers may not practice the metaphors they preach. We have all observed didactic, old-fashioned lecturers who claim to be “constructivists,” or who imagine themselves to be “coaching” their students.

³ I mean here to respond not only to Floden’s call for attention to rhetorical matters, but also to Kathy Carter’s (1993) recommendation that scholars engage in “mapping work” in the new and little understood area of research on teachers’ stories.

By way of illustration, I will describe the dilemmas faced by a group that has been working to develop video-based case studies for use in teacher education. Before I begin, though, I want to point out that the method of my argument may seem unusual, in that I consider myself to be neither a quantitative nor, precisely, a qualitative researcher. My interests have to do with rhetorical theory, and what I wish to offer here is a critique of the rhetoric of teacher education. Or, more to the point, I want to look at the trouble that results when teacher educators refuse to admit that they are in the business of persuading teachers to change.

2. Case methods and materials

My colleagues and I did not set out to study the role of rhetoric in teacher education.⁴ Rather, we have come to these issues through the back door, by way of an entirely different project. We planned to study a much narrower topic, the use of videotape in staff development. It was only after beginning to do work in this area that we came to see the importance of addressing broader concerns about persuasion (or teacher educators' beliefs about persuasion). Let me explain:

Our research was inspired by a recent trend in teacher education. We have observed that as videotape recorders and players have become widely accessible, over the last several years, many teacher educators have begun to experiment with new ways to use this technology in their work. For example, they might show videos in order to illustrate effective teaching practices, or they might encourage teachers to compare what they see on video to their own experiences in the classroom. In particular, though, we have been interested to see if video might lend itself to a third kind of approach, something along the lines of what Merseth (1996) terms "Cases as Opportunities

to Practice Analysis and Contemplate Action" (p. 728), or what Harrington (1994) calls "dilemma-based" cases.

Typically, such cases take the form of narratives that describe challenging situations in the classroom; they serve as conversation pieces, open-ended problems to be discussed by groups of teachers. As Harrington puts it, they "are not prescriptions, the one best way to approach a situation, but a way to reveal pedagogical puzzles" (p. 119). Further, they are means by which teacher educators might seek to alter the traditional balance of power in methods classes and staff development workshops. Rather than talking down to teachers, attempting to supply them with knowledge derived from educational research, they must step out of the way somewhat, facilitating teachers' own engagement with intellectually challenging problems.

For teacher educators who wish to play such a role, videotape may seem to be a particularly attractive medium. Not only does it provide viewers with a sort of "virtual apprenticeship", an opportunity to learn about teaching by observing and analyzing records of actual classroom practice, but it gives them a "common text" for debate and analysis. Further, since video can show "raw" footage of classroom interactions, rather than a case writer's description of what happened, it allows viewers to make their own interpretations of the events.

As soon as we began to study the use of such video cases, however, we came to a dilemma: how can one be sure that a video merely facilitates discussion, rather than imposing a perspective upon its viewers? Consider, for example, the sorts of promotional films that are sometimes shown at in-service workshops and professional gatherings. Often, such videos take advantage of Madison Avenue's latest techniques: like television commercials, they can include voice-overs, music, a range of camera angles, dazzling graphics, and so on. The medium lends itself quite well to those who want to persuade teachers to buy a particular product or service, or to convince them to agree to particular reforms.

How might one distinguish, then, between videos that "support" teachers and those that

⁴ Magdalene Lampert, Deidre Lefevre, and I worked on the Teacher Development through Video project, at the University of Michigan. We thank the MacArthur Foundation for its generous support.

“manipulate” them? In other words, how do we ensure that our video case methods really do amount to “teacher-directed” learning, rather than yet another, more subtle and insidious, form of “top-down” control? This problem cannot be taken lightly, for if we cannot find a way to tell “support” from “manipulation”, then we may have to question the very assumptions that led us to be interested in case methods in the first place.

We might begin by distinguishing (or creating a tactical dichotomy) between videos that aim at the persuasion of teachers and those that provide for analysis by teachers. But is this a true comparison? Notice that the terms do not even belong to the same part of speech: “persuade” is a transitive verb, but “provide for analysis by” is a passive verb construction, like “allow for” or “succumb to”. It directs us toward what the other person is doing, deflecting attention as much as possible away from the speaker’s actions (the filming, editing, distributing, and showing of a video). The choice of phrasing is a sly one: if it sounds like a reasonable distinction to make, then it will have succeeded in persuading you that there exists a distinction to be made. In other words, if you find yourself nodding your head, then you will have just been convinced that “persuading” and “providing for analysis by” are opposite and mutually-exclusive activities. I believe that they are no such thing.

An analogy might be helpful. Imagine, for instance, that I were an advocate of non-Western forms of medical treatment, and I were appalled by the arrogance of mainstream doctors. In order to win you over to my position, what might I say? I might wish to convince you, to begin with, that there is an essential difference between surgery and acupuncture. After all, I will have no hope of winning you over to my side until I convince you that there are sides to be taken. Thus, I might find myself saying something to the effect of the following: surgeons practice aggressive and invasive medical procedures, cutting into people’s bodies and manipulating their organs; by contrast, acupuncturists do not perform aggressive procedures; their methods allow the patient’s natural curative abilities to take over.

On the face of it, this may sound like a straightforward comparison. I seem to have placed two

practices side by side, so that my readers may judge which is preferable. Actually, though, I have performed a linguistic sleight of hand. I have described surgery in terms of its means, but I have described acupuncture in quite different terms: I have shown you what are not its means, and I have shown you its ends. To make this comparison parallel, I would have had to describe acupuncture’s means as well. But this is precisely what I will not mention. To mention acupuncture’s means would be to tell you about the insertion of needles into bodies. And to do so would be to invite you to object to my distinction, for you would surely say something along the lines of, “You stick needles into people? How can you say that is not invasive?” To which I would have to respond that it is not as invasive, and soon we would find ourselves on a slippery slope, trying to decide what should count as an acceptable sort of medical invasiveness. Rather than distinguishing between two opposite practices, we would find ourselves debating their common attributes and defending our reasons for preferring one over the other. Thus, I might lose your support, since you might easily decide that if you are going to have an invasive medical procedure, you would prefer to suffer the bloodier one, given what you know of its efficacy.

The distinction between promotional and case videos can be scrutinized in the same way: in order to convince you to see the two as essentially different (and to get you to drop your support of “top-down” teacher education, in favor of “teacher-directed” case methods), I might try to direct your attention toward the production of the first kind of video, and away from the production of the second. When describing promotional videos, I will talk about the manipulation of camera angles, scripts, and so on; I will point out that the videographer has intruded upon the class, and that the teacher and students have clearly put on a show for the benefit of the camera; I will argue that the producers have edited the video in such a way as to create particular impressions, forcing a message upon the viewers; and I will argue that the whole video is nothing but propaganda, a rhetorical performance that aims to convince and to sway.

However, when describing video cases, I will talk about what the video makes possible: analysis by teachers. I will emphasize the process of interpretation, whereby viewers come together to talk about what they see in the footage; I will describe the film as if it were a blank slate, ready to be filled in by those who watch it. In other words, I will induce you to overlook the fact that both sorts of videos involve careful attention to matters of production, else you would soon realize that the two kinds of video lie on a single slippery slope, that the makers of all videos aim to persuade their audiences.

Not surprisingly, in her recent literature review on case methods in teacher education, Merseth (1996) finds that very few scholars have called attention to the making and selection of case materials. That is, they have avoided discussion of those *means* that case methods share with every other sort of teacher education. Mostly, they have focused on two other concerns: how should teacher educators *facilitate* the discussion of cases, and how are teachers supposed to *learn* from them? Presumably, once teacher educators have made these decisions, they need only to reach into their casebooks and select whichever case is appropriate to the chosen methodology; or, if no such case exists, the teacher educator will simply go ahead and write (or film) one.

In fact, though (and as we shall see in the next section), case methods require the teacher educator to spend quite a lot of time thinking about the materials themselves: What should be the topic of the case? Who is the audience? How is this audience likely to respond? What medium should be used, and why? If video, then what sort of video? What should it show? What should it not show? Where does one get hold of such materials? How should one produce them?

I find it quite telling that, in articles that advocate case methods (which tend also to be articles that criticize research-driven teacher education), these sorts of decisions are more or less invisible. And from what is our attention deflected? We are led not to notice how teacher educators struggle to write cases; we do not see them deciding whether to show a video or to have teachers read a narrative; we do not see them trying to choose between using

a fictional narrative and a “real” one ... Thus, what is invisible in the scholarship are the difficult, pragmatic, *rhetorical* decisions that teacher educators must make. And, thus, we are led to believe that they “support” teachers, in contrast to those who “manipulate” them.

However, to the degree that those teacher educators *do* concern themselves with creating, selecting, and delivering particular materials, they likely sense that they *are* engaged in a rhetorical practice. They write texts in such a way as to persuade teachers to discuss a particular dilemma, or they show videos that are designed to inspire teachers to reflect on their teaching, or they create materials that will convince teachers that it is valuable to share experiences. Yet, lacking a vocabulary to discuss these rhetorical acts, and having been led to believe that it is wrong to engage in such persuasion (because it reeks of “top-down” influence), they can easily feel conflicted, guilty, and tongue-tied. Put more strongly: they can find themselves in an agonizing, even anguished, position, that of the surgeon who loathes to use the scalpel.

In order to illustrate this struggle, I wish to offer a brief case study of my own. I turn now to the dilemmas faced by a group that has been working to develop a series of classroom videotapes that teachers might use as conversation pieces, in order to stimulate valuable discussion of their own teaching. On the one hand, these teacher educators describe themselves as producing rhetoric-free materials, videos that “represent” the “reality” of teaching “truthfully” and in an un-biased, open-ended manner. On the other hand, their day-to-day decision-making appears to be thoroughly rhetorical, concerned with modifying their texts in order to be more “appealing” to an audience of teachers and “effective” in bringing about changes in their practice.

3. Videos have lives of their own: The case of RDI

In 1992, a team of teacher educators working at Research and Development, Inc. (the pseudonym refers to an actual consulting firm, one that is devoted partly to educational research) conceived of a new project devoted to helping math teachers

improve their classroom practice.⁵ During the past decade, they observed, there had been much ferment in the world of mathematics education. Various and well-publicized studies had drawn a harsh portrait of national achievement in the subject, and instructional reforms had been urged by everyone from parents to practitioners to policy-makers. In response, a compelling agenda for change had been articulated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (1989, 1991). For the team at RDI, these new “Standards”, which called upon teachers to encourage mathematical “inquiry” among their students, seemed to represent a radical departure from the pedagogies most typical of American teachers, especially those that emphasize drill and practice and the rigid sequencing of topics. As RDI summarized the new approach in their (successful) grant proposal to the National Science Foundation,

Doing mathematics becomes an active, generative process in which students work together to make sense out of complex situations, in which they develop conjectures and theories,

⁵ Let me pause here, at the start of this case study, to give a brief account of my research at RDI. In 1996, when I joined the Teacher Development through Video (TDV) project as a research assistant, RDI had already given TDV permission to study its efforts to produce video-based case studies for teacher education. RDI gave this permission partly out of generosity to the research community and partly as a personal favor to the TDV project director, who had acted as a consultant to their work. I was given considerable access to RDI’s records, including grant proposals, reports, and internal memos, as well as edited and unedited videotape. Over the following six months, I visited RDI on two occasions, conducted several interviews with staff, and was a silent observer at focus group meetings with teachers and teacher educators. Originally, the goal of my research was to gather data about the sorts of conversation that classroom videotape elicits among teachers in faculty development settings. It was in the process of interviewing RDI staff (and undoubtedly because of my training in the field of Rhetoric and Composition) that I became interested in the issues that I discuss here. My conclusions are based primarily upon textual analysis of those documents and transcripts in which RDI staff describe the goals of their work. These conclusions were fleshed out in conversation with colleagues on the TDV project and in correspondence with a number of readers. I sent a draft of this paper to the RDI staff in 1997, but I have not had the opportunity to discuss it with them.

submit them to public scrutiny, and then revise and improve them based on issues, findings, and mathematical arguments raised in public discussion. (1992).

For math teachers who are accustomed to telling their students how to do problems, or who see learning as a private activity, involving the memorization of discrete formulas and facts, these Standards can represent a quite foreign set of expectations about what is supposed to happen in the classroom. As the team at RDI realized, teachers would need support if they were to be successful at making such a striking transformation, or else they would likely retreat to their familiar routines. It was the goal of the new project to provide such support. Specifically, RDI would assist middle-school math teachers in their efforts to bring their teaching in line with the new Standards. They were well aware, however, that many other reformers had already faced difficulties in pursuing such aims:

It is clear that well-designed workshops, courses, and summer programs have engaged teachers in this new vision of mathematics. However, seasoned teacher enhancement personnel generally agree that teachers tend to take home from these intensive beginning experiences only a few relatively inflexible specific activities or strategies....Many find they are unable to enter a second and more crucial phase of development towards mastery of the inquiry approach.

Our experience shows that teachers begin to move into this second phase only when they begin to confront a set of issues that are peculiar to this style of teaching. These issues include deciding how to ask the right questions, how to initiate and manage alternative forms of classroom organization (e.g. pair work and group work), how to model and support student conversations about mathematics, and how to understand what and how students understand. (1992).

RDI’s concern was to find a way to help teachers not only to grasp at parts of the reform agenda, such as cooperative learning or the use of calculators, but to embrace that agenda more fully, such

that they see the parts as relating to a larger conceptual framework, that of learning as “inquiry”. But what might RDI accomplish if other teacher educators had already grown frustrated with the limitations of workshops and summer courses? A significant contribution, they reasoned, would be to provide materials that would enable such workshops and courses to be more effective. What was needed were new tools, ideally ones that would help teachers to collaborate and to support one another in struggling to meet NCTM’s Standards. The plan was to produce videotapes of classroom interactions, ones that would highlight particular sorts of teaching and learning, in order to elicit valuable discussion of the relationships between educational theory and practice.

Of course, the idea to use videotape as a tool in teacher education is not a new one. For as long as videotape has been available, it has been put to use in pre- and in-service programs. Professors and staff developers often show footage of classrooms (for example, in order to model specific practices, to provoke discussion, or to help individuals to record and critique their own teaching), and they use videotape to show various kinds of interaction (from “raw” footage to dramatic recreations), with quality varying from home-made to highly polished. However, for the team at RDI, there seemed to be a need for a specific sort of videotape, one that would offer teacher educators a tool that was not otherwise available. Again, the goal was not to help teachers to learn a technique (as is the case, for example, in Marilyn Burns’ well-known videotapes, which demonstrate the use of “manipulatives” in mathematics); nor was the goal to convince them to use the “inquiry” approach. Rather, the goal was to provide a tool for teachers who *already* wanted to transform their classrooms in this way.

In their proposal, the RDI team described itself as aiming to produce, over three years, 8–12 videos that would “illustrate” this new kind of teaching, showing teachers “how the new approach to mathematics education plays out in real classrooms. Without such examples, it is difficult to envision how the inquiry approach really works”. As far as this use of video is concerned, there was nothing new about RDI’s idea. Their plans were, in

some respects, similar to what Merseth refers to as the use of an “exemplary” case, whereby the teacher educator seeks to model a particular practice, one that teachers might attempt in their own classrooms.

What was new in this proposal, however, was the kind of teaching that RDI chose to represent on their videos. Rather than showing “master teachers” in action, they decided that they would film teachers who were themselves struggling to transform their teaching. Thus, unlike many other cases, it was not an exemplary *practice* that was to be modeled; rather, the videos were meant to illustrate the *process* of becoming an inquiry-based teacher.

The distinction is crucial: RDI intended to minimize the distance that often separates teacher from “expert”. Rather than showing video of someone who appears to be especially successful and high in status, they chose to film teachers who would come across as competent but not perfect, teachers with whom the viewers would be able to identify. Moreover, RDI wanted to avoid placing *themselves* in the position of standing above their viewers or leading them on. They did not want the videos to seem like advertisements for particular teaching practices. Rather than sending the message, “Here is the goal towards which we want you to strive”, they wanted to encourage viewers to make their own interpretations of what they saw.

4. RDI’s Dilemma: To be persuasive or not to be?

But how has the team actually gone about producing these materials, over the last few years, and how have they succeeded? What does a “facilitative” case look like, and how does one create such a thing?

RDI assumed that the logical first step would be to decide what would be the topic of each video: each one was meant to “focus on a key issue in inquiry teaching”, such as “Classroom Discourse” or “Inquiry Mathematics and Technology” or “Management of Pair and Small-Group Work”. The series was to be “scripted”, in the sense that RDI chose these themes even before they began to collect footage. The videographers would select and

film classrooms with these topics in mind, and the editing process would allow them to highlight those moments that showed relevant interactions. Then, since each video would have a self-evident theme, the facilitators might back off and let viewers talk freely about the issues.

It seems as though RDI expected that they could split the meaning of a video into two pieces: the *theme* and the *interpretation*. On one hand, each video would objectively *have* a subject, or would be *about* something, a general topic. On the other hand, viewers would impose their own meanings upon the footage, fitting an interpretation over that topic, just as one fills in the bare sketches in a coloring book. Thus, the influence of the teacher educator was to be limited to the first step, the designation of the theme (and this theme was to guide them in the process of filming and editing). At that point, the viewers themselves were to take the reins: after watching the video, they would raise questions about what they saw, discuss the qualities of the teaching they had seen, describe what the students seemed to be learning, reflect on their own classroom experiences, and share ideas about mathematics pedagogy.

However, things never seemed to go quite so smoothly. Throughout their project, RDI frequently gathered together focus groups of teachers and teacher educators, in order to gather ideas on how the videos might be improved and how they might be used toward staff development. Although RDI expected that these groups would provide a range of responses and suggestions, the team was surprised by the variety. Rather than picking up on the videos' intended themes, the viewers would focus on all sorts of other issues: they would criticize the teacher who had been filmed, discuss mathematical content, argue about curriculum, comment on students' abilities, talk about the video-project itself, and so on. In fact, the audience seemed intent on discussing everything except the topics that the videos were meant to illustrate.

Clearly, RDI had been naive in thinking that they could separate the interpretation of the videos so cleanly from the designation of the themes for discussion. They had assumed that the selection of those themes would amount to giving the see-saw just a mild push, so that the viewers might begin to

push back. However, it became obvious that viewers needed to be pushed much more firmly. If RDI wanted people to have productive conversations about the videos, then they would have to find some way to get their attention focused on the same topic; otherwise, discussion would stall or would wander off into a variety of unrelated areas. But how could they accomplish this task without manipulating teachers' interpretations? How could they persuade teachers of the theme without persuading them in the larger sense? How could they give a good push without being too pushy?

Conveniently, this "agenda-setting dilemma", as Richardson (1992) has called it, appeared to resolve itself as a result of a technical decision about the video production process; or, the cynic might argue, RDI changed their production process *in order to* resolve their dilemma. Either way, by the time that RDI submitted their first annual report, they had already begun to question the idea of pre-scripting the videos:

We are committed to capturing real events in real classrooms. It has been our experience (and the experience of many people we have talked to) that teachers respond much better to classrooms and situations that feel real to them. But the result is a constant tension between video ideas we have developed before the fact and the footage we get from our ongoing work in the classrooms. The classroom video often takes us in directions that are different than those we had originally thought about.... There's a constant interplay between issues we have identified as important and issues that emerge from the footage we are shooting. (1995).

In other words, rather than selecting the themes prior to the filming, RDI decided that it would be more effective to make those decisions during the course of editing the videos, once they had looked at the footage. This would allow them to bring out the themes that seemed to be evident in the film, rather than trying to force that film into pre-cast molds. Moreover, as one of the project codirectors relates, in a 1996 interview, not only did it come to seem unrealistic to expect the videos to conform to plans, but it became gradually more apparent that

video is a resistant medium. Editors have to struggle to shape it into any sort of a useful form:

I think one could say more generally that the video material tends to have a life of its own, and that has ended up driving us. We made, in the original proposal, a list of ten different ideas we wanted to pursue... and part way through we came up with four big ideas we wanted to try and pursue. And, in fact, as we have gone through the video material, it seems to take on a life of its own. I do not know if that's our lack of discipline or what...

It is no small matter to make such an assertion. To argue that texts (of any medium) have a “life of their own” is to deny that they merely serve as vehicles for prior intentions. It is to admit that videos do not simply mean what we intend for them to mean, and that it is no easy matter to bring a text from idea to reality. Rather, the creation of a case is (to invoke the lessons of the Writing Process movement of the 1970s) an ongoing, recursive affair, one that involves planning, composition, self-critique, response from others, revision, and the formation of new plans. Moreover, the production of case materials occurs over time, and in the midst of this creative process, one will likely come to see that the materials lend themselves to new possibilities, to purposes that had not come to mind previously. Or, the materials simply may not bend to one's will; one may come to see that it is impossible to create the text that one had in mind, whether for lack of skill and resources, or because of the limitations of language and technology. Or, and perhaps most important, one will come to realize that one cannot know how the teachers will respond. The most that one can do, as rhetoricians have argued for 2500 years, is to *anticipate* the audience's response and to produce a text that one *hopes* will move that audience in the desired ways. One must consider one's audience and *adapt*.

And yet, the RDI project directors do not seem comfortable with this last idea. Rather, they describe their new editing process in a way that hedges their involvement in a rhetorical activity. While they justify their decision not to pre-script the videos on the grounds that editors must be

flexible and *responsive*, they avoid any suggestion that they might be *manipulative*. To say that “videos have a life of their own” is both to acknowledge the complex, rhetorical work involved in producing cases and also to distance themselves from it. They imply that the *videos* are responsible for making rhetorical decisions, not them; the videos themselves decide how they will influence teachers.

Thus, RDI shifts the burden of persuasive intent onto the shoulders of the video. To say that they will bring out the “issues that emerge from the footage we are shooting” is to imply that the designation of a theme happens objectively. The theme is assumed to be already there in the film, waiting for RDI's discovery. Happily, RDI can claim that they are not guilty of pushing viewers to discuss a particular topic. In fact, there is an inversion of influence: it is the video that persuades RDI of its theme, and RDI simply relays this decision to the viewers. Thus, RDI can have the thematic cake and eat it too: their workshops become much improved, since they have the luxury of announcing a specific topic of discussion, and yet they are absolved of the responsibility for having chosen that topic, or for limiting the viewers' power to choose one themselves.

It is clear that the RDI team remains deeply conflicted about their own agency. They agree that the teachers should become empowered, and they realize that video is a trickier medium than they had anticipated, but they remain uncertain as to what kind of power the *teacher educator* should wield. While they have become increasingly aware of the need to make active, rhetorical decisions about how to compose and revise their texts, they continue to speak a language that deflects scrutiny away from the possibility that they are in the business of persuading, or exerting power over, teachers.

Looking back to RDI's grant proposal, it becomes evident that this tension (contradiction, I think) has been there all along. On one hand, the proposal describes an educational purpose that is distinct from any persuasive intent: “We believe that videotape offers the possibility of reaching a wider audience of teachers and staff support personnel who are interested in *changing mathematics classrooms*” (1992, my emphasis). RDI presumes

that the audience is *already* committed to pursuing the new Standards for teaching mathematics. Thus, they aim to *illustrate* the struggle to bring teaching in line with the NCTM Standards, not to advertise those Standards. Video is meant to be a transparent medium, one that offers a view of teaching as it really is; and having looked upon this teaching, it is hoped, viewers will reflect upon their own practice. Such a goal requires that the medium itself remain disinterested, free of any deceit or flattery:

To summarize, we intend to show teachers working through a difficult but important growth process as they try to implement a new approach to mathematics. We intend to portray that process *honestly* ... (1992, my emphasis).

On the other hand, RDI places a very different agenda side by side with the first:

To be *effective*, videotapes must appeal to teachers directly. For this reason, most of our footage will be of school teachers working in their own classrooms ... We feel that since teachers of this type comprise our target audience, the tapes will be more engaging and convincing than if they focused on the polished performances of “master teachers”. (1992, my emphasis).

Clearly, there is some recognition, here, of the practical necessity to manipulate the content of the videos, rather than simply allowing reality to broadcast itself through them. RDI must decide what sort of footage and what sort of editing will produce the most effective text, given the particular audience. Their goals, then, are not merely to illustrate; they also mean to produce videos that will convince. But to convince their audience of *what*? “To be effective ...” *in what way*? To appeal to teachers *for what purpose*? To engage them *to what ends*? The text does not specify, leaving us to imagine what those purposes might be. Perhaps RDI means to suggest that the videos are to be *intrinsically* convincing, independent of any particular goals. However, this would be as meaningless as to argue that a hammer is intrinsically useful (of course, it depends on the purpose: is one pounding

nails or sawing logs?). A video cannot simply convince; it must convince somebody *of something*, in some context.⁶

Although this ambiguity has permeated RDI’s work from the beginning, the team has never come close to resolving it. As of the summer of 1997, nearing the end of production on their series of videos, they continued to describe those videos as serving two, mutually incompatible, goals: to represent the “reality” of classroom life, and to present classroom life in ways that will prove “convincing” to teachers. And further, they continued to speak of the videos as though they possessed agency, as though the videos were responsible for persuading viewers to discuss particular issues. In short, even as RDI worked to persuade their audience to become better mathematics teachers, they continued to try to persuade that audience (as well as a larger audience, consisting of their funding agency, their peers in teacher education, and observers like me) that they were the sort of teacher educators who do not try to persuade teachers.

I want to reiterate that there is a sense in which the RDI team benefits from this confused set of goals. Though I do not believe that they had any

⁶ Could RDI be arguing that the videos should persuade viewers that teaching is being illustrated? It is certainly possible for this to be the goal, as any rhetorician would argue (for example, magicians might seek to persuade audiences that they are illustrating the sawing of somebody in half). Indeed, given that the term “realistic” is often treated as an honorific, particularly in describing films (as in the compliment, “The movie was so realistic” or the complaint, “I did not like it; it did not seem real”), it might be wise for RDI to try to convince viewers that the films are “real” and “illustrative.” However, this would be to contradict the first goal: RDI has stated (and I have no cause to think that they are trying to be deceptive about this) that they want actually to illustrate certain teaching practices, rather than merely to persuade viewers that the video illustrates such teaching.

Interestingly, though, in a small, preliminary study, Erickson and Wilson (1982) found that teachers judged “realistic” videos of classroom practice to be most “useful”. But what sorts of videos did they find to be “realistic”? Their judgments depended on what they expected the videotapes to show; the actual circumstances of filming (whether a video was scripted or not, whether the people in the video had been hand-picked or not, and so on) mattered very little. In this study, “realism” turned out to lie in the eyes of the beholder.

sinister designs (in fact, I assume that their motives have been entirely admirable, all along), I suspect that the lingering ambiguity permits them to neutralize any suggestion that they engage in a “top-down” form of teacher education: if a critic were to accuse RDI of trying to manipulate teachers, the team could reply that the videos are merely illustrative of teaching practices, and that it is up to the viewers to create meaning for themselves; if that critic were to press them on this point, they could argue that if anyone is being manipulative, it is the video itself, and only to the degree that it chooses its own themes for discussion; and if a critic were to accuse them of producing weak or ineffectual materials, they could reply that they have worked long and hard to ensure that those materials are convincing.

But should not we value the coherence of our work more than we value our ability to avoid criticism, or to elude the specter of top-down school reform? Is it really so shameful to admit that teacher educators aim to persuade teachers to change? Is rhetoric so disreputable that we must go through such contortions in order to deny our rhetorical practices? Why can not RDI simply announce that they wish to use their videos in order to convince teachers to consider the benefits of (and, with luck, to practice) inquiry-based math instruction?

Again, my point is not to judge whether or not this particular series of videotapes will prove to be a useful tool for teachers and teacher educators. Rather, I want to suggest that the field of teacher education might benefit, more generally, from a frank and open discussion of our rhetorical practices. And if we do admit that the very nature of our work is rhetorical, we need not consider this admission to be a shameful one. Given their audience, which may resent the appearance of “top-down” motives, RDI may be justified in disguising their intentions, claiming to have little desire to push teachers. But, for those of us who write for a slightly different audience, and in an entirely different context (I mean to refer to those of us who write “scholarly” essays in academic journals), I wonder if it makes sense to be disingenuous in this way? Must we continue to dichotomize our motives, claiming to reject the “top-down”, and does not

this lead us to confuse ourselves about the very nature of teacher education?

5. Conclusion: Toward a rhetoric of teacher education

In calling for attention to the role of rhetoric in teacher education, Robert Floden (writing in 1985) argues that university-based scholars have a special responsibility to “guide” school practitioners. This task, he believes, requires the ability to communicate effectively.⁷ Given their access to data, and given their expertise in collecting and interpreting that information, researchers are in a unique position to advise teachers, to help them “in seeing the difference between well-grounded discussion and loose talk, and between conclusions that are better supported and less well supported by the data” (p. 26). But this does not mean that researchers should tell teachers what to do, Floden cautions. Rather, they should assist them as they learn to think for themselves. Instead of *training* teachers, they should *educate* them to reason through their own actions. It is this sort of practice that requires a savvy use of rhetoric. After all, in order to ensure that others make good decisions, guides may have to flatter or inspire or convince. There is nothing contradictory about using rhetorical means to guide others toward such educational ends. Or, as Floden puts it, “Education does allow for intending to change minds in specific ways. The restriction is on how this is done, not that it is done” (p. 27).

It should be clear, by now, that I mean to revive Floden’s call for an explicitly rhetorical approach to teacher education. However, judging by the lack of response to his call, over the past decade, I probably should not expect a thunderous reply to my

⁷ Of course, Floden’s stance may have changed over the years since he wrote this piece, and I do not know that he would make precisely the same argument today. The debate about the role of university researchers is a complex and contentious one, and it has evolved in important ways since 1985. Here, I simply wish to point out that Floden’s discussion of rhetoric ought to be understood in the context of debates about the roles of researchers and practitioners.

own essay. After all, rhetoric remains, in common usage, a disreputable activity, and it continues to be seen, by many social scientists, as a threat to serious and disinterested research; it connotes precisely the sort of bias that researchers are forever trying to control and avoid.

And it is not only the social scientist who is likely to scorn the arts of persuasion. To those scholars who have embraced qualitative or interpretive research methods, it may look as though rhetoric is responsible for the very dominance of social scientific methodologies in education: quantitative researchers have always advertised their wares aggressively, capitalizing on the reputation of the sciences in order to seduce policy-makers into funding their research and heeding their advice. And to those, such as teacher-researchers, who might resist the tendency to privilege theory over practice, rhetoric may look like yet another way for university researchers to condescend to those who work in schools. From such a perspective, Floden may appear naive or worse, in that he seems to underestimate the Machiavellian ends of rhetoric. If teacher educators truly want to help and support practitioners in their efforts to change, then perhaps they ought to abandon manipulative stances altogether, including the superficially innocent role of “guide”.

But is rhetoric itself to blame for the sins of particular rhetoricians? I would like to argue that it is not, that we can think of rhetoric as a neutral tool, as blameless as the brush that one uses to paint a picture. Ironically, however, in order to make this point, I will have to take issue with Floden’s argument on behalf of rhetoric. One aspect of his *treatment* of the arts of persuasion seems dubious to me; he appears to reaffirm the belief that there is something intrinsically awful about persuasion, even as he recommends it.

What Floden refers to simply as “rhetoric” is, in fact, merely one version of rhetoric, Aristotelian at its core. He speaks from the disciplinary vantage point of the social scientist, and his rhetoric follows suit. He takes for granted a distinction between the specialist, a person who has access to *special* methods of discovering knowledge, and the lay public (teachers, in this case), who can only imitate those methods. Thus, the rhetorical problem is au-

tomatically defined as the persuasion *of* teachers *by* researchers. If we define rhetoric in these terms, then we might indeed have reason to accuse Floden of “top-down” thinking. Despite his references to “guiding” and “educating” (rather than “directing” and “training”), it remains the case that he calls upon researchers either to persuade teachers of knowledge gleaned from scientific studies, or to coach them on less-rigorous versions of scientific research methodologies.

However, we do not have to define rhetoric in this way, and I would like to suggest a very different conception of the rhetorical situation at hand in teacher education. First, though, let me clarify what I mean by describing Floden’s perspective as Aristotelian: whereas Plato had taken an aggressive stance against Sophistic rhetoric, describing it as an intrinsically misleading and corrupt form of speech, Aristotle took a somewhat kinder view. While he reconfirmed the Platonic distinction between truth and opinion, he reserved a place for discourse that deals with each. Rigorous scientific dialectic, he believed, is certainly the preferred mode, but most people are incapable of following such professional talk. Public speaking requires a simpler form of logic, one that will allow listeners to be convinced of truths, even if they cannot follow the inductive and deductive proofs that led to their discovery. That is, while Plato argued for dialectic *instead of* rhetoric, Aristotle saw a need for dialectic *and* rhetoric.⁸

Aristotle can thus be said to have denigrated rhetoric even as he rehabilitated it. On the one hand, he devised an extensive system of terms and heuristics designed to help public speakers to invent and deliver arguments that are persuasive to their audiences and appropriate to their contexts. On the other hand, he defined rhetoric as a subordinate and derivative system, inferior to an elite scientific (or philosophical) discourse. The discovery of first principles, those foundations upon which rhetoric might draw, becomes a task for

⁸ Although it should be pointed out that Plato did reform, somewhat, his critique of rhetoric. See, in particular, the *Phaedrus*, one of his later dialogues, which concludes by describing a Philosophical rhetoric.

a small, expert, professional class, one that does its work at a distance from the public forum.

Two and a half thousand years later, we can hear echoes of Aristotle's voice in Floden's argument. On the one hand, Floden attempts to rehabilitate rhetoric, defending it against the old Platonic prejudice, the notion that rhetoric is intrinsically deceitful and immoral, opposed to the quest for truth and the knowledge of reality. On the other hand, his defense is, like Aristotle's, rooted in his professional identity: so long as *scientists* practice the arts of persuasion, and so long as they practice them in good faith, then rhetoric can be of value.

In fact, though, one need not take "researcher" or "teacher" to be limiting categories. Other rhetorical traditions (and, so far as classical origins are concerned, we might look to Isocrates or Cicero, or even to the Sophists) allow us to position *anyone* as rhetor (though, to be fair, for Isocrates and Cicero, as for Aristotle and Plato, "anyone" excluded women, slaves, and other non-citizens). The value of what is said is not necessarily determined by who says it. Rather, we may choose to grant everyone (researcher, teacher, teacher-educator, administrator, policy-maker, and parent alike) the right (and even the obligation) to enter the arena of mutual persuasion. My point is to suggest that rhetoric is the common ground of teacher education. It does not belong to one group or another. Rather, to the extent that we all have a stake in educational reform, we all are entitled not only to speak, but to speak *well*.

Floden makes a mistake, I think, in assuming that the discussion of rhetoric's role in teacher education must *follow* from observations about the proper relationship between researchers and teachers. This is to beg the question of disciplinaryity, a question that is complicated by the very existence of people such as teacher educators, who may have difficulty fitting themselves into the existing categories. This is to suggest, also, that rhetoric is decent, or respectable, only when practiced by an exclusive class of people, researchers. It presumes that only they can be trusted to persuade others, because only they have access to that knowledge which is worthy of onward passage.

Instead of taking the disciplinary conclusion as our starting point, however, I believe that each of

us should begin with the rhetorical question: *who is our audience, and how do we wish them to be moved?* Certainly, we ought to be wary of those who would condescend to teachers, or those who would practice what Tyack and Cuban (1995) call the "remote control" theory of educational management. However, we should not mislead ourselves into thinking that we can purify ourselves of the will to have an influence on teachers, nor to imagine that our task is to swing an imaginary pendulum from an entirely "top-down" paradigm to one that is entirely "teacher-directed". Ultimately, so long as we choose to work with teachers, we cannot help but try to persuade them. We must ask ourselves not *how do we get over the urge to manipulate teachers*, nor *how do we avoid practicing rhetoric?* Rather, we have no choice but to wrestle with a far more subtle, complicated, and interesting question: *how do we devise a rhetoric that is both powerful and decent*, one that is effective without becoming an abuse of power? And this is a question that can only be answered within our particular contexts, only in light of what we know about *who* is trying to persuade *whom* of *what*.

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