

(Editor's Note: This essay is part of a series of reviews of prominent works important to rhetoric. Reviewers evaluate the merits of established works, discussing their past and present impact. The intent is to provide long-term evaluation of significant research while introducing important scholarship to those entering the field.)

Jim W. Corder. *Uses of Rhetoric*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971. 230 pages.

This book has never received the attention that it deserves.

One reason is that Jim Corder, my former professor, had the misfortune of publishing *Uses of Rhetoric* in the wrong year—1971. In 1970 Young, Becker, and Pike's *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* appeared; in 1971 James Kinneavy's *A Theory of Discourse* landed at bookstores; and in that same year Edward Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* was issued in its second edition. These groundbreaking works—the last two of which sound quite official—overshadowed Corder's more idiosyncratic book.

Another reason for the inattention is that Corder disguises the radical nature of his proposals—some of which the profession has, to its loss, yet to consider seriously.

A model of scholarly productivity, Corder for over two decades published in *College Composition and Communication* (winning the Richard Braddock Award), *College English*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *Rhetoric Review*, and other journals. Among other projects, he wrote a progressive handbook (*Handbook of Current English*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1981) which went into at least six editions and one of the best process-oriented freshman textbooks available in the early 1980s (*Contemporary Writing*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1979).

Of all this output, *Uses of Rhetoric* is the most important.

Like Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, Corder's book communicates a sense of the utter freshness of the rediscovery of rhetoric, especially classical rhetoric, as an overlooked art with rich potential. The wonder of that discovery shines throughout *Uses of Rhetoric*.

Corder's tone ranges from self-deprecating to warm to preachy to oracular. He loves to quote. On these pages excerpts from Wayne Booth elbow those from

Marshall McLuhan, Alfred North Whitehead, Kenneth Burke, Edward Abbey, Ed Corbett, and many others. Having begun his career as an eighteenth-century scholar, Corder frequently cites and analyzes passages from Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson. Despite their frequency, these citations usually amplify Corder's voice instead of shoving it off the page.

In certain respects this book is decidedly conservative. Criticizing student excesses of the 1960s—excesses that also bothered Corbett ("The Rhetoric of the Open Hand and the Rhetoric of the Closed Fist." *College Composition and Communication* 20 (Dec. 1969): 288-296)—Corder worries that the younger generation lives in a "pin-ball world" (156) and rejects sequential reasoning. Corder also warns against excessive pride, at times sounding vaguely reminiscent of certain Christian theologians, such as Augustine and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Whatever one makes of these passages, *Uses of Rhetoric* includes at least four progressive ideas that through the efforts of many people, became standard during the late 1970s and the 1980s.

First, when the obsession with a sacrosanct literary canon was strangling departments of English, Corder demonstrates that rhetoric unlocks both "high" culture and "low" culture. He imaginatively applies the classical scheme of syllepsis to unpack part of a canonical poem by Alexander Pope and a contemporary magazine advertisement for breath freshener. Understanding the ad contributes to understanding Pope, which contributes to understanding classical rhetoric. Rhetorical analysis, literary analysis, and cultural analysis—"high" and "low"—become the same enterprise.

Like Corbett and like Frank D'Angelo, who in a 1971 essay demonstrates that using classical rhetoric to analyze another kind of popular text—graffiti—can yield rich results ("Sacred Cows Make Great Hamburgers: The Rhetoric of Graffiti." *College Composition and Communication* 25 (May 1974): 173-79), Corder expands English studies by provoking students to examine popular texts that the profession preferred to shove out of sight.

Second, Corder strongly emphasizes invention and criticizes those who ignore it: "Not uncommonly, rhetoric or composition textbooks begin with the study of organization, or style, or exposition, but of invention we seldom hear" (50). He argues that Aristotelian *topoi* should be used for invention, not taught as ends in themselves.

Third, he dismisses efforts to teach writing through grammar drills: "Repeated study of the same grammar mainly produces grammarians; it seems to have relatively little to do with the thoughtful production of thoughtful discourse" (143).

Fourth, he complains that teachers do not even consider how to prompt students to connect with audiences (134). However difficult, helping students locate audiences is one of the more important tasks that writing teachers should undertake.

Of course, most of us “know” these four “truths” now, but how many did in 1971?

Today the profession still ignores three of Corder’s most valuable suggestions.

First, teachers often demand that students produce finished papers before they seriously weigh a variety of possible stances. Corder offers a solution: If we take invention seriously, we should teach a rhetoric of inquiry during the first semester of a freshman writing course and a rhetoric of argument during the second semester. Students should investigate and discover during the first term and marshal arguments during the second. In his words, “The intent of the first semester is to promote gathering, exploration, and experimentation, not ten or however many essays.” At the end of the first term, “the student might be expected . . . to present his plans for the work or works he will write in the second semester” (175-76). Through this approach students would enjoy enough time to choose topics and research them thoroughly instead of doing what they often do now: ventilate prejudices already absorbed from parents and peers, sometimes organizing those biases in splendid arrangements that we have taught them. This suggestion illustrates Corder’s definition of rhetoric as “a perpetual opening continually closing” (112).

Second, Corder advocates flexible scheduling of classes. Instead of forcing every course to fit a rigid format of three hours per week over fifteen weeks, he wants students to take some “one-, two-, or three-week courses, or four-day courses, in clusters . . .” (169). He charts a possible student schedule:

3 Weeks	Basic Course, 3 Hours, One Semester			2 Days
4 Weeks		1 Week		2 Days
3 Weeks		6 Weeks		
2 Days				

(169)

I know of no colleges or universities that institutionalize anything like this proposal. Practitioners of deconstruction have dismantled everything except the semester system, which remains intact, unexamined, and sacrosanct.

Something like Corder's proposal could be implemented on a small scale. What would happen if a professor conducted not only a standard fifteen-week seminar for a handful of students, but occasionally a three-week (or two-week or one-week) class in her current research topic attended by every (or nearly every) PhD student in a department? Students would gain a much better understanding of English studies as a whole and why professors think deeply and passionately about topics that students—often wrongly—believe could never captivate their own interest.

Third, Corder proposes rhetoric across the curriculum: "The canons of rhetoric are a model, to my mind the most efficacious, for any interdisciplinary study" (187). What would this entail? At least a decade before WAC begins spreading in earnest, he advocates it:

From the 4 categories [of discourse James] Kinneavy offers [in an essay], it would be possible to build a catalogue of most of the forms of our discourse; from these, in turn, it should be possible to construct a sequential, graduated program of writing and speaking, which, I am convinced, should be the core of any curriculum, extending throughout a school's entire curriculum, belonging to the whole school, and being presented to the whole school. (172-73)

For Corder, rhetoric across the curriculum should include more than flexible scheduling and WAC. Teachers should not merely add writing to existing courses, they should also apply rhetoric when sequencing the curriculum. "Some courses seem to be predominantly *inventive* resources," he observes, while others "appear to be predominantly designed to create or to elucidate structures of design" and yet others "appear to be predominantly designed to allow students to appropriate a new style or styles" (169-70). A single class could focus chiefly on invention, structure, or style—canons that could function as superordinate categories for framing the entire curriculum. Just as invention comes first for a writer, one or more courses stressing invention could precede others in a student's sequence of courses.

Why did *Uses of Rhetoric* not launch WAC in 1971? Corder lacked the large readership that Kinneavy and Corbett tapped. And Corder's own university resisted his proposals. But he was also too ambitious and too radical. Administrators and professors would not and will not replace most of the standard fall and spring terms with three-week and two-week courses while simultaneously installing writing as a major component of each course while simultaneously resequencing courses according to the canons of invention,

structure, and style. At universities (as elsewhere), change is often glacial and reforms come one at a time, if at all.

When WAC launched itself in the 1980s, WAC leaders convinced non-English professors to teach writing as a way of knowing, not Corder's more ambitious rhetoric across the curriculum. And, given the academy's usual resistance to change, injecting writing into so many courses represents a huge reform.

For our next step, we should not worry about using the canons of rhetoric to frame the entire curriculum. Within our departments, however, we should ask a first-year student to devote the initial semester of a writing course to investigate, explore, and discover topics, sources, and perspectives; she should spend the following semester organizing arguments based on her earlier research. She should dive into a few two- or three-week seminars taught with enormous concentration and passion every day. She should take Jim Berlin-type classes on historical and theoretical issues of rhetoric, poetics, race, class, gender, plus—I would add—nationalism, political repression, nonviolent protest, and social upheaval (see *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring English Studies*. Series Editor, Stephen North. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996). She should read speeches by Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. She should collaborate. Finally, she should examine style and its relation to larger rhetorical issues.

Given that all good scholarly writing requires new jargon, I say that a neo-Corderian, neo-Berlinian English curriculum would be an excellent idea.

Keith D. Miller
Arizona State University