

Burkean Identification: Rhetorical Inquiry and Literacy Practices in Social Media

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Abstract

Through Facebook and Twitter, users now have communities always already available. The dynamic nature of these sites, constantly updating, changing, and shifting, allows for a rich exploration of the nature of self and community. This paper examines such interactions within the “Parlour rooms” of social networks, using Kenneth Burke’s theories on identity as a framework. These platforms offer opportunities for writing teachers to explore rhetorical concepts, develop students’ critical literacy skills, and foster collaborative learning. Considered in the context of computer-mediated communications, Burke’s theories expand traditional notions of the rhetorical concept *kairos* and, as Cynthia Sheard (1993) notes, enrich our notions of what it means to be spatially, temporally, and rhetorically situated as writers and readers in these digital mediums.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Burke, Composition, Social Media

*A*s recent graduate students and first time teachers of college composition who participate in vibrant social media communities, we were eager to see if there were ways to incorporate the wide range of technological tools we rely upon in our personal lives into our teaching practices. Since our online selves are such a prevalent part of our public lives, we were able to identify with the Tweeting, Gramming, and Posting of students in our classrooms.

If we were able to successfully build community, collaborate creatively, and challenge ourselves intellectually through social media in our personal lives -- three of the same pedagogical goals we had for our students -- we couldn’t help but wonder if these tools could do the same in our classrooms. As we began to explore the possibilities of social media through an academic lens, we discovered similarities between the social media platforms we used on the weekends and the theories we were learning and espousing during the week. As we considered the parallels between the Facebook Wall and Kenneth Burke’s (1941)

“Parlour Room,” we realized the need for social interactions and collaboration in learning, especially in the university writing classroom. Social media platforms have a potentially powerful role in these classrooms, opening new modes of dialogue and spaces for collaboration and creation for students and academics.

Burke’s New Rhetoric: Identification #identificationnotpersuasion

Kenneth Burke’s work sought to reimagine the aim of rhetoric, positing a shift from argumentation to *identification* in order to describe how “selves are mutually transformed by the influence of each other” in discursive acts (Clark, 2004, p. 37). Burke’s self-proclaimed “new rhetoric” is less concerned with persuasion and more interested in the explicit and implicit ways in which people identify with one another. He writes:

Identification” at its simplest is also a deliberate device, as when the politician seeks to identify himself with his audience. In this respect, its equivalents are plentiful in Aristotle’s Rhetoric. But identification can also be an end, as when people earnestly yearn to identify themselves with some group or other. Here they are not necessarily being acted upon by a conscious external agent, but may be acting upon themselves to this end. In such identification there is a partially dreamlike, idealistic motive, somewhat compensatory to real differences or divisions, which the rhetoric of identification would transcend. (Burke, 1951, p. 203)

Burke draws heavily on Aristotle’s writing but shifts the self-motivation away from a deliberate intent to persuade the external audience. Identification, while it

can be conscious or unconscious, aims to describe how we negotiate differences and similarities with others, “a mode of relationship that enables the transformation of self that follows from a dialectical encounter” (Clark, 2004, p. 37). Although Burke would argue that identification *can* involve persuasion, the ongoing negotiation between self and other for the purpose of establishing identity must shift away from the agonistic nature of typical persuasive techniques.

Woodward (2003) asserts that “Aristotle so convincingly places the roots of communication in the impulses of common ground and assimilation” (p. 5) as a deliberate act of persuasion to have another join the community, but Burke shifts these impulses to a more nuanced and amenable place. The internal motivation is to establish a *shared* identity between self and community, as opposed to an external motivation to *persuade* the community of an identity.

This rhetoric of identification is embodied in social networking sites, spaces where digital selves are created and re-created through interactions that have both explicit and implicit consequences, in both the real world and the digital world. The actions of social networking – friending or following, messaging, commenting, sharing, re-posting or “retweeting,” hyperlinking, snapping and sharing photos – are used “to effect changes in attitudes, to induce action, and to invent new realities” for both the user and her audience, offering the possibility of the “dreamlike, idealistic” identifications Burke refers to (Sheard, 1993, p. 309). These interactions are attempts by users to establish community-accepted identities. Burke’s framework focuses on the potential for cooperation available in rhetorical action, as opposed to possible antagonism:

“it locates hope in the capacity of human beings to judge wisely and deliberately how they will interact with each other” (Clark, 1997). Burke writes:

A rhetorician, I take it, is like one voice in a dialogue. Put several such voices together, with each voicing its own special assertion, let them act upon one another in co-operative competition, and you get a dialectic that, properly developed, can lead to views transcending the limitations of each. (1951, p. 203)

#scenesofrhetoric

Because identification, not persuasion, grounds Burke’s new rhetoric, Cynthia Sheard (1993) argues that he offers a particularly special view of the rhetorical concept of *kairos* as “the ‘scene’ of rhetoric,” arguing that all language acts are foregrounded by *kairos* (p. 292). She argues that, for Burke, the *kairotic* moment

includes all those “scenic” or contextual elements of both time and place that circumscribe and delimit moments of discursive exchange: from the culturally transmitted opinions and attitudes that inform an audience's orientations to and expectations of the discourse, to the exigence of the occasion itself and the conventions of the genre dictated by that occasion at that time and place. (p. 305-6)

In its more simple definition, a *kairotic moment* is the moment when the speaker seizes the right opportunity to address an audience: a window of opportunity is opened and shortly thereafter closed. Isocrates stressed *kairos* as the ideal conditions for persuasion, while Aristotle noted that *kairos* “[creates] the available arguments” that constitute a rhetorical

situation (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012, p. 48). As Sheard notes, these approaches to *kairos* belong to the “old rhetoric” of persuasion, concerned with the effectiveness of a particular argument in a particular time and physical space; such definitions are not only simple but simplistic and incomplete, “[focusing] on a speaker's opportunism and manipulation of an audience” while “[overlooking] the attendant ideas of appropriateness and propriety with respect to time and place which *kairos* encompasses as well” (p. 292). Burke, Sheard argues, provides a more open, complex conception of *kairos*, indicating that language acts would actually be impossible without it.

Since language is an “answer to a situation” that in turn “[appeals] to a reader’s identification with that situation,” rhetorical acts deal directly with situational truths and *kairotic* uncertainties (Blakesley, 2002, p. 9). Although Burke himself does not explicitly discuss *kairos*, Sheard argues that *kairos* is crucial to his notion of *scene* because of how it regards *situations* and the ways they deal with contextual, contingent knowledge. For Burke, everything is grounded in *kairos* because a language act necessitates a scene in which agents perform acts; Burke actually referred to the scene as “a container for acts and agents” (as cited in Sheard, 1993, p. 305). These descriptions are directly parallel to modern attempts to understanding *kairos* as more than merely the rhetor’s capacity to seize an opportune moment in time; *kairos* seeks to encompass all of the situational relationships within a scene:

The particulars of a rhetorical situation include the rhetor of course: her opinions and beliefs, her past experiences, as well as her position on an issue at the time she composes a discourse about it. But the rhetorical situation also includes the opinions and

beliefs of her audience at that time and in that place, as well as the history of the issue within the communities that identify with it. (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012, p. 48)

Although this is not from Burke himself, this describes perfectly his very notion of *situation*, identifying the importance of the rhetor's position in relation to her audience. However, it does not simply end with this rhetor-audience relationship; the rhetorical situation also includes the identifications associated with an issue, its appropriate communities, and those communities' attitudes about the issue. Thus, the rhetorical situation is more complicated, as the rhetor must assume "a kind of ready stance" regarding the history of an issue as well "the more precise turns taken by arguments about it and when the arguments took these turns" (p. 48). Again, these rhetorical situations operate within a *kairos* that refers to more than just an opportune time and space but also a particular contextual appropriateness and self-awareness *as an agent within a scene*. Although Crowley & Hawhee (2012) stresses turns of "argument" here, we could simply replace "arguments" with Burke's *orientations* to suit Burke's framework of identification:

[Orientation] forms the basis of expectancy—for character telescopes the past, present, and future. A sign, which is here now, may have got a significance out of the past that make it a promise of the future. Orientation is thus a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they might be. (Burke, 1984, p. 14)

For Burke, orientation is the rhetor's stance in relation to choices and considerations about what came before her,

as well as what is to come; this relates back to Burke's well-known extended metaphor of the Parlour, which has been modified and recycled for use in the teaching of writing to reference the "ongoing conversation" students enter into as part of their writing endeavors at the university. The idea of an orientation is related to a writer's acknowledgment of the "ongoing conversation" related to an issue; thus, orientation is how a writer maintains awareness of the self in addition to the situation and the possible future outlook of the situation. In other words, the ambient context, surrounding attitudes, and other contingencies of the situation are of equal weight in comparison to the rhetor and the audience, as important components of rhetorical acts. In a similar discussion of writing, *epistemē*, and *technē*, Byron Hawk (2004) explains this essential relationship:

[A writing of *technē*] sees cognition, thinking, and invention as being beyond the autonomous, conscious, willing subject. A writer is not merely in a situation but is a part of it and is constituted by it. A human body, a text, or an act is the product not simply of foregrounded thought but of complex developments in the ambient environment . . . There is only relationality— *technē* emerges only through enacting relationships. (p. 378)

It is clear how Hawk's piece — stressing the importance of teaching students that the intersections between writer, audience, and context are crucial parts of writing practice — contains inflections and echoes of the Burkean notion that rhetorical acts are grounded by their connections and positions within the ambient environment. Specifically, Hawk's mention of relationality calls to mind Burke's Pentad, used as a tool to approach

his dramatic framework. The Pentad seeks to draw connections between possible *scenes, acts, agents, and agencies* of a text or situation, in order to make generalizations about human motives as related to language. In this sense, the Pentad, as a tool used to explore possible relationships of a given scene at a particular moment, is a representation of the writer's/rhetor's relationship to and position within an environment. Hawk (2004) might argue that the Pentad is the perfect embodiment of the situatedness of writing; it perfectly demonstrates how and why teachers must provide opportunities for writers to see "the ecological and ambient nature of rhetorical situations" (379). In doing so, teachers would provide techniques for students not only to observe the complexity of these situations but also to participate somewhat authentically in them, to write and therefore "[operate] in these complex, evolving contexts."

Identification in Context: The Modern Parlour Room of Social Media #theparlourgoesdigital

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows

late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress." (Burke, 1941, p. 110)

Burke's often quoted Parlour Room analogy is an ideal model of modes of the layered identifications happening within a discursive exchange: a conversation has already been established. Relationships have been determined, a style of discussion and mode of discourse has been decided upon, and participants have already committed themselves to a perspective and voice. When a new member enters the room, there is a necessary period of quiet observance before the member can join the conversation. The discussion has already begun, and the new member must establish their place in it. This observation requires the new participant to identify their authority and capability of participating knowledgeably in conversation about the subject of this particular discourse, to identify the trend of discussion – where it has been and where it is going, and to identify the social decorum of the conversation – is there a certain type of discourse required? An expectation of hedging or an encouragement to aggressively debate?

Please replace He by he/she in accordance to APA style we argue that this analogy from Burke parallels the shifting nature of social networking discourse. Tonja Mackey (2012) writes:

You arrive home late from work one evening and log on to FB. You find your wall (messages from friends) full of new posts. Many of your other friends, as well as some of their friends, have made comments on said posts, some emotional (or heated), some not so much. You read and you think for a while before you decide if there is

anything you'd like to add to anyone's comments, or, perhaps, you read something that prompts you to post a hasty response that, later, you wish that you had dwelled on for a while first. You grow tired, so you post a "status" (often a discussion starter) of your own, knowing that you'll log back on tomorrow to see who has responded to you. And so it continues, day after day. (para. 6)

Mackey's Facebook anecdote is nearly identical to Burke's imagined Parlour, except that physical, real-world conversation has been replaced by virtual interactions. As Woodward (2003) suggests, "we possess a staggering range of symbolic resources that allow us to consider another person's experiences and recognize them as our own," and interfaces like Facebook capitalize on these symbolic resources. "These include the cues of our sensory world—sight, sound, smell, touch—as well as the linguistic tools for communicating these experiences to others," Woodward states (p. 2). Burke was especially interested in examining how we use these symbolic resources to enact symbolic action. In a social media-centered community, language is the only symbolic mean available through which to establish identification. The establishment of identity through language, though limited in the symbolic resources, provides new opportunities for users to explore possible identities and representations of themselves: "While some argue that the Internet erases difference...available rhetorical features enable individuals to construct not only a representation of their offline selves but also to experiment with and create new identities... This creation of new self can also change the way users, and others, perceive themselves offline. In essence, we create ourselves with language when we

write" (Mackey, 2012). This opportunity to explore and develop multiple representations broadens the potential for identification with others but also provides the individual user with a way to proclaim her own construction(s) of reality and her place within them:

Regarding Kenneth Burke's philosophy of literary and social analysis, when Facebook users post a 'status' on Facebook, they are making a comment about society, or about themselves in relation to society. In actuality, these users are constructing their versions of reality through this online social venue, which can be compared to Kenneth Burke's argument that language is a creator of and response to what is going on in the world. Likewise, Facebook comments are responses to what is going on in the world of the users. (Mackey, 2012)

As Mackey indicates, these discourse communities change and shift so rapidly that a user is required to experience Burke's quiet "observation period" after being removed from the community for a period of time. It is crucial for the user to reacquaint himself with how the conversation in the feed has progressed since his last participation, if he hopes to become an acting member of the current state of the community. In sum, the digital parlours of sites like Facebook and Twitter, to add to their complexity, are constantly and continually evolving. Even when users are absent from these sites, conversations take place independently, growing and changing indeterminably. Social media networks, thus, have begun to change how, why, and when we construct identity.

Our Identity and Community Move Online #youmeandwe

“Identifications can be extremely personal and specific to a moment, ... [and] however unique and independent we wish to be, we are also heavily vested in the recurring hope of making lasting connections with others.” (Woodward, 2003, p. x)

Burke’s theories on identity, as demonstrated here, envision identity as both internally and externally created. While the foundations of his theory build on the pre-existing view that humans are social creatures, Burke identifies the motivation for social identification to be internal and elemental. It is no longer just a desire for social relationships that draws us to community; a social audience is *necessary* for the development of identity. In today’s digital world, community is no longer constricted to the interpersonal relationships around us, the family, school, or political structures, or the physical neighborhoods that we frequent. Communities are also virtual, remote, in the cloud. This modern form of community adds an even more complicated and dynamic element to the complication of identification and identity establishment that is accurately and wholly reflected in Burke’s theories, although he could have in no way anticipated these virtual communities.

Burke recognized the danger of agonistic persuasion and broadened identification from solely a persuasion of the social audience to an empathetic relationship. He “understood the mechanics of recognition and empathy used by Aristotle and other ancient rhetoricians to be only part of a larger process he labeled consubstantiality” (Woodward, 2003, p. 7).

Consubstantiality relies on an empathetic view of the other through a shared social context, while still maintaining the discrete identity of the self. This type of interaction does not exist in isolation but rather in “co-operative competition” with one another, in dialogue with other voices. This Burkean, almost utopic rhetoric imagines that individuals, engaging in discursive exchanges with others, can grow, develop, learn, and create meaning in ways that are greater than what they could have accomplished alone. Gregory Clark (2004) applies this concept by drawing parallels to the jazz ensemble, in which “the private aspirations of the individuals and the public performance of the group” are imagined as complementary to one another, creating a productive space, rather than engaging in competition (p. 33). Like the jazz ensemble, social media feeds are collaborative sites in which users publicly shape and re-shape their private understandings and beliefs. Thus, the Facebook Wall, the Twitter feed, the responding to a digital photo in an online forum, are all potential spaces for virtual communities to grow and thrive. It is this ongoing interaction with the representations put forward by other users that makes identification, and thus community, possible:

Self, identity, and the definition of the situation are critical concepts for the investigation and analysis of social behavior. These concepts are joined in process and are not “merely parts,” although we may treat them as such for purposes of analysis. Notwithstanding multiple definitions, many social scientists seem willing to accept the following: self—or the sense of a total and exclusive persona; identity—that part of the self by which we are known to others; and the definition of the situation—if people define things as

real, they are real in their consequences. (Altheide, 2002, p. 2)

By positioning identity as a social construct instead of something self-designed, Burke seeks to view identity as largely a public endeavor, as a “conscious alignment of oneself with the experiences, ideas, and expressions of others . . . Like so many aspects of communication, identification is both a process and an outcome” (Woodward, 2003, p. 5). Additionally, Woodward describes this foundational human desire to share, identify with, and build upon others’ experiences: “Among the most important is the chance to study how messages gain saliency by building on the energy of another person’s experiences. At the very core of communication as a humanistic study is a sense of anticipation about instances of fluency that can be transformative in their impact on audiences” (p. x). It is clear that the creation of an identity is contingent upon a social audience, an audience of users who are simultaneously creating their own narratives. Because these online identities and audiences are in a constant state of flux, isolating these ever-shifting points of identification can be complex and worrisome for users. These users experience identification as “a heightened awareness” along a continuum of notifications, links, photos, comments, advertisements, sidebars, friend requests, which sometimes become uncontrollable (Woodward, 2003, p. 5). Due to the public permanence of social media, these virtual exchanges become artifacts that are absorbed into the broader community. The user forfeits control over the artifact’s place and future in that community. This can create a dissonance between the way we perceive the community, our place in the community, and what actually constitutes the community. Simply put, as most habitual users of social networking have

experienced, it’s hard to let go of our presence and representation within these sites. *How will the online community be different tomorrow? Who will have commented? How will I know if I’m not able to check my page for a week?* This combination of a heightened awareness and the nebulous nature of the networking feed can produce actual anxiety for users, a condition termed Fear of Missing Out, or FOMO. Our extreme investment in our self-constructed narratives causes this emotional response when we are distanced from our social media accounts and “missing out” on what’s happening.

Digital Literacies and the Writing Classroom: Public Pedagogy #whatnow?

These ideas about situated literacy practices may seem obvious to modern writing teachers and scholars, but Burke’s ideas are some of the first to incorporate these notions about identity and rhetorical cooperation. For example, The Pentad, as detailed earlier, has been long cited as a heuristic for invention in writing classes; Burke’s Parlour is often used a metaphor to show how young scholars enter academia, required to understand the major tenants and conversations of their field before they are allowed to become actively participating members. In addition, post-process writing pedagogies that take into account the “social processes” of writing are currently in fashion in composition studies. However, as technology becomes more unavoidable in our daily literacy practices, as does the “ambient environment” referenced by Hawk, Burke’s concepts take on new importance.

Freishtat and Sandlin (2010) note that education theorists across disciplines, not only writing teachers, have begun to explore the pedagogical implications of

digital communications in spaces in which “knowledge is determined by the socio-cultural, contextual layering of both online and real-world realities ” (p. 508-9). Burke’s new rhetoric provides a platform for teachers to explore the complicated, layered nature of audience, awareness, and purpose within the context of computer-mediated interactions on social networking sites, “. . . [helping] students see how communication works in real, live rhetorical situations” (Coad, 2013, para. 9). The many layers and modules that make up these sites’ user interfaces, such as advertisements, search boxes, and group or business pages, “are a part of social practices that can be subjects of deconstruction through rhetorical analysis” (Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010, p. 510). Further, Freishtat and Sandlin (2010) argue that social media networks, Facebook in particular, are useful sites of analysis because they contribute to student learning not through classroom curriculum but through what they call “public pedagogy”:

Participation in a digital network like Facebook is predicated on users learning to become “fully active participants in culture and society through our embeddedness in the habitus of everyday life” (Luke 2005, 42). Therefore, it is crucial to continue to examine what this means to youth who are engaging with the informal learning of digital networks and their enculturation processes. (p. 520)

Public pedagogy, thus, is enacted in student learning outside the classroom; Facebook’s public pedagogy has important implications, as it shapes how young adults view and use technology, aiming “to craft users with particular dispositions who behave in particular ways online” (Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010, p. 503). For this reason, Freishtat and Sandlin do not believe

Facebook is merely a tool for linking individuals to communities, where users can present autonomous identities. Rather, the process of communicating across a network like Facebook is more complicated, since the individual user operates within a framework dictated by the network itself, which is corporately and monetarily shaped by forces outside of the users’ control.

The hashtag (#) is one of many widely-used symbols that can be used to teach students about the learned behaviors and norms that result from the designs and layouts of social media interfaces. The hashtag is used to group related entries together so that they are searchable. Simply, hashtags are used for grouping and sorting posts, providing keywords identified by the user so that their post is included in the “ongoing conversation” surrounding that topic. For example, Twitter enables users to search for individual hashtags, which will bring up results of all of that hashtag’s users and their posts (photos and text), listed in order of most recent activity. Tim Olson (2013) argues that the hashtag has taken on more than just the function of creating keywords – “it’s become a multi-faceted, functional part of electronic language. It carries a specific tone, in the way that sarcasm does in spoken language” (para. 8). While the hashtag demonstrates the specific choices in regards to tone, purpose, and audience that users must make, it also demonstrates Freishtat and Sandlin’s point that the scope of those choices is limited within the communicative tools of the social network’s framework. Although the hashtag symbol determines and restricts the types of interactions and behaviors of the network’s users, it is also ultimately generative and connective. It provides users with resources for speaking or learning about a particular theme or topic but also “[bridges] knowledge, and knowing, across networks

of interest” (as cited in Schirmer, p. 26). The hashtag envisions social media sites like Twitter and Facebook as repositories for vast amounts of connected, organized knowledge, presenting users with “opportunities for exploring issues” (Crowley, 2012, p. 41).

For example, James Schirmer (2011) encourages that the use of Twitter, micro-blogs, and other digital media interfaces in the writing classroom, as these tools can create “the opportunity for reflective interaction, the ability to link related ideas, and the freedom for readers and other bloggers to ‘suggest additional considerations and exploration of the idea presented and promote further reflection and through regarding a stated viewpoint’ (Duffy & Bruns, 2006)” (p.17-18). Because professionals who are well versed on certain topics use mediums like Twitter to promote their own research and discover what others are doing, these interfaces are models of the collaborative, social nature of writing. When students are asked to use these sites in the classroom, they experience firsthand how a ready network of peers serves as a resource for further research and feedback. Using these digital platforms in a collaborative writing class can also aid “in the construction and maintenance of a learning community as well as the establishment and reaffirmation of a learning identity unique to each individual involved” (Schirmer, 2011, p. 36). Social networking sites can benefit the writing classroom, serving as logs that document student progress and process, “learning narratives that become a public record over the course of a semester,” furthering the idea of writing as a communal, situated practice (p. 36).

These classroom uses of social media view writing from a utopic standpoint

as an imaginative activity open to possibility and self-discovery. When considered alongside these digital rhetorics, Burke’s concepts are important to teaching writing as a mode of inquiry and discovery rather than merely a mode of communication or explication. Social networking sites provide a direct way to model writing’s potential as a mode of discovery and learning, a medium for exploring issues and engaging in genuine inquiry in a way that is meaningful not only to the individual but also to the larger community.

The connective networks of social media, because they are always concerned with composing for an audience, tangibly illustrate Burke’s notions of identification, orientation, and kairos as the “scene” of rhetoric. Burke thought that “[education] should prepare students for seeing through the “clutter of machinery, both technological and administrative, which civilization has amassed in its attempts to live well”(as cited in Cahill, 2011). Exposing students to these ideas can help them see what is at play behind this technological clutter, and how it shapes their literacy practices both in and outside of class; David Croad (2013), for example, notes that although Freishtat and Sandlin’s (2010) article is difficult, he asks his undergraduate students to read it. For him, the article’s density shows students that digital communication is actually more complicated than superficial status updates. These interfaces continue to shape our beliefs and understandings as people, as well as our relationships with technology itself. By allowing students to recognize the pervasiveness of these digital mediums, teachers of writing can demonstrate the situatedness of literacy practices and the complicated intersections between digital and daily life.

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