

# Rhetoric and Women

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### Teaching Gender Inclusive Language in Professional Writing

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#### Abstract

This narrative on pedagogy presents language as a tool for resistance and rhetoric as a means for interrupting social oppressions. In particular, I draw attention to one approach I have used in the Professional Writing classroom to teach gender-neutral and oppression-conscious language practices.

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#### Key words

Social Justice Pedagogy, Professional Writing, Discourse Studies, Anti-Oppression, Teaching Narrative

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## Teaching Gender Inclusive Language in Professional Writing

Victor Villanueva (1993) speaks of academic discourse as one (among many) assimilation mechanisms within the academy that supports ideologies of individualism (I worked hard to get here) to the sacrifice of individual recognition (I must suppress my “home” ways of speaking in order to be accepted here). And while this first-generation Puerto Rican teacher-scholar acknowledges the value conventions in writing can have, he reminds us that rhetoric “after all, is how ideologies are carried, how hegemonies are maintained” and also that rhetoric is a tool for social change. Language, when used consciously, “is a principal means—perhaps *the* means—by which change can begin to take place” (121). I am also a first-generation college student and, similar to Villanueva, I struggled with self-doubt and the desire to “prove” through my writing that I belonged in this place. Additionally, I felt pressure to deny my literacy histories, including oral traditions and folklore, as authentic and valid in the academic context.

Thankfully, this shame of Home influenced me only up to a certain point in my college career. As a graduate student, I experienced an academy that was growing more self-aware of the politics of exclusion and the desire for diversity. I was schooled in feminist traditions and critical race theory, and I read the less traditional and more community engaged models of intellectual and scholarly language that Villanueva, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Cherríe Moraga, and my feminist mentor Adela C. Licona generously provided. These scholars, and others, taught me the necessity of academic work to intersect with and have positive, social impact on the lived realities of those alienated from and / or marginalized by the ivory tower.

Rhetoric—the study of language and the practice of using language consciously—emerged as a field of social change where I could finally build a home in the academy. It was from this academic location that I could work against my own embedded biases and to work with others to “uncover and de-mystify certain processes in this and other societies, and to make mechanisms of manipulation, discrimination, demagoguery, and propaganda explicit and transparent” (Wodak, 1989, xiv).

In short, I became an academic with the intense desire to confront and dismantle from within rhetorics of oppression and everyday ways of exclusion that plague the public and private education system in the United States. Teaching students to be aware of their language is not enough; my pedagogical intent is to encourage and prepare students to act, discursively, with mindfulness and a desire to interrupt injustice. My social justice agenda shapes all the classes I teach, but I would like to focus here on my approach in the Professional Writing classroom to teaching gender-neutral and oppression-conscious language practices.

In this interdisciplinary writing class, I define professional writers as those who write in the workplace (such as, engineers, accountants, managers, computer programmers, teachers) as well as those who write as their profession (such as, grant writers, creative writers, technical writers). Students leave the class with a clearer understanding of the types of communication required by their major / career of choice, a set of materials useful when entering the job market or graduate school, and practical experience in a range of writing genres including producing a grant application on behalf of a local non-profit, social justice oriented organization. I emphasize a process approach to writing and effective communication as rhetorical awareness: Writing for a particular audience with an intended purpose that demonstrates awareness of the situation / context.

Our course begins with a visualization activity that invites students to remember a group discourse situation where someone said something they considered offensive about a group they may or may not identify with. How did they respond and how did the group receive that response? What intended and unintended things happened when they responded? Looking back, how might they alter their response? In these kinds of discourse situations, the offensive comment is often said casually and in a way that doesn't seem full of hate. You know how they are, for example, *those* <insert homogenized group here>. When faced with this discourse situation, we can actively agree, passively agree through silence, or actively contradict the offensive comment. These rhetorical moves, as described in Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak's *Discourse and Discrimination* (2001), reflect a form of "social control" that encourages and restricts certain ways of talking. Remaining neutral, that is choosing not to engage in the group discourse situation after you have been spoken to, proves impossible.

Silence is a speech act (Eliasoph, 1999), and in a group discourse situation, silence is interpreted as acceptance and tolerance for oppression (Tatum, 2003). If we are to identify as anti-oppression rhetors, then we must act in these moments. *We must act*. And yet many of us feel unprepared for how to take advantage of the moment in a strategic way (*kairos*) to interrupt oppressive and status quo ideologies. Though remaining silent may reflect an individual's awareness of personal

risk and unequal power differentials, I believe dominant group members should feel responsible to act in the name of social justice. (I could write a whole other article about unintentional harms caused by dominant group members who act *on behalf of others* without first-person awareness of struggle and marginalization. So, I must clarify here that I encourage students toward strategic, mindful discursive action that is grounded first in listening and, second, in critical consciousness about privilege, power, and positionality).

In the professional writing classroom, for example, students practice revising our language to reflect a non-binary approach to gender (that is, avoid gendered pronouns completely when possible, rewrite sentences to use concrete nouns instead of pronouns, and use gender-neutral job titles such as server instead of waitress). We grapple with the challenge of unlearning a dominant practice in our communication, which is to gender individuals as he *or* she, thus failing to recognize trans\* individuals and others who fit best in the liminal space of between. Later, I ask students to engage in critical dialogue with a partner, pushing them to consider the impact such language has on individual lived realities. Who is made more visible when using gendered pronouns, especially in academic discourse? What are the long-term implications for making one or more identity groups invisible in how we use language? How are these implications different within and beyond academic discourse? What are the in-the-moment feelings of being minoritized or dismissed by the language of another? In what ways can the individual work for more inclusive language practices within everyday discourse situations? For this last question, I ask students to devise a discourse situation where they have encountered gendered language and / or exclusionary comments related to those situated beyond or at the intersections of the binary.

Through this critical questioning and guided self-reflection exercise, I am asking students to play critically with language. They are to contemplate strategies for how they can react productively to such a situation in order to prepare them, to perhaps empower them, to act rather than passively accept the racist, sexist, gendered, oppressive stereotypes so common to our everyday discourse situations. “One of the most nurturing and generous benefits that comes when we engage in critical thinking,” according to bell hooks, “is an intensification of mindful awareness which heightens our capacity to live fully and well” (2009, 185). In order to “possess” our language, to take charge of how we use it and to be attentive to rhetorical outcomes, hooks instructs us, “. . . I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize” (168). Before this activity, many students have not considered gendered language an exclusionary practice and, more importantly,

few recognize their contributions to supporting the systemic oppression of others. I present language as a tool for resistance and rhetoric as a means for interrupting oppression. Everyday rhetorical situations reflect productive sites for learning from one another, for identifying embedded bias in a non-hostile way, and, above all, for shaping and (re)inventing more inclusive ways of talking.

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