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# The Rhetorical Context of a GED Preparatory Program

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Culture is not lying about, waiting patiently to be discovered; rather, it must be *inferred* from the words and actions of members of the group under study and then literally *assigned* to that group by the anthropologist. “Culture” as such, as an explicit statement of how the members of a particular social group act and believe they should act, does not exist until someone acting in the role of ethnographer puts it there.

Harry Wolcott 1987, 41

### ***The Rhetorical Context of a GED Preparatory Program***

Since rhetoricians believe that everything is rhetorical and I am a rhetorician, I wanted to look at the rhetoric involved in a program of GED training. The professional context or culture that I examined in this research project is a GED Preparatory Program at the large school district Community Learning Center in a Mexican-U.S. border town. It is inclusive in meeting the needs of its students, in providing a service to the public, and in following federal program guideline.

People who drop out of high school usually do not have the minimum skills and training to function in today's complex society and technological workplace. The national drop out rate is 9.8% while in Texas the drop out rate for Hispanic students is 50%, for African American students is 34-45% and for white students is 24% (Shapleigh 9). In a large border town with Mexico, the dropout rate is also very high (U.S. Census). What happens to these dropouts? Where can they go without high school diplomas and what recourse is there for them in the job market in a city where the median income of households in this city is less than \$30,000 (U.S. Census)? “The Lower Rio Grande metropolitan area ranks last in the nation in per capita income, averaging only 45% of the U.S. per capita income” (Shapleigh 9). However, many people who drop out of high school eventually earn a diploma or a GED. One study found that “63 percent of students who dropped out had earned a diploma or GED within eight years of the year they should have originally graduated” (Child 1).

### *Significance*

These are the students I wanted to investigate. Where did they go and how did they achieve their goal of passing the GED test? What happened to motivate them to seek more education and certification of that education? This is important to all of us because without qualifications for good paying jobs these people might always stay at the bottom of the economic strata and be a weight on society. What gets those 63 percent of dropouts to return and complete a program of study after having failed or simply given up on the system so young? If we can understand what brings them back and why, then we should be able to improve that return rate and thus, improve our society. This is important to the individuals that can improve their lives and to the society in which they live. It is important to me as an observer of literacy and language skills. It is important to our border culture that education is available to at risks students who slipped through the cracks in their original school experience.

### *Professional Context*

The professional context or culture that I examined in this research project is a GED Preparatory Program at the large school district Community Learning Center in a Mexican-U.S. border town. It is inclusive in meeting the needs of its students, in providing a service to the public, and in following federal program guideline. These courses stretch from students needing English as a Second Language, through a pre-GED class, to the completion of preparation to pass the Graduate Equivalency Diploma. The GED is General Educational Development “an international high school equivalency testing program for adults. The GED is composed of a series of five tests that evaluates participants’ skills and knowledge in the following subject areas: Language Arts, Reading, Language Arts, Writing; Mathematics; Social Studies; and Science” (General Education 1). These tests, designed to measure the skills that would

correspond to the work done by recent high school graduates, allow people a chance to have a designation equivalent to the high school diploma. The tests include the ability to understand and apply information; to evaluate, analyze, and draw conclusions; and to express ideas and opinions in writing. Many adults who do not graduate from high school either acquire these skills through work and life experiences or return to a program for adult education like the one I studied here.

### ***Methodology***

I looked at this research from the lens of phenomenology. According to John Creswell, the definition of such a study “describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (51). I heard and saw what the students, staff, faculty, and administration had to say about the phenomenon of the GED program. I investigated the meaning of the experience for individuals of their everyday lived experiences. I collected data through interviews and/observations. I chose to express my terms in a rhetorical background. I will present the perspectives on the GED program of the six participants.

### ***Methods***

I spent six weeks observing and having conversations with six key individuals in this GED program. I interviewed three students, two female and one male, all Hispanic. The females were both in the program as volunteers while the male was from the state work force program. I talked to the students informally in groups and as individuals on many visits. I spent time with the instructor during and after class. I moved into their culture and became a fixture in it. Students turned to me to share their scores, to ask questions, or to chat. I had access to the class work on a daily basis on a drop in schedule so they never knew when I was coming or how long I would stay. I saw their reactions, behavior, and sense of community. I became a part of

that community as a fixture to respond to and share information, pride, and disappointment. I also included the director of the program, the classroom teacher of the group I observed, and a support teacher in the program. All three were Hispanic. All three also shared a sense of a unified learning community. They were available for revisits and for daily access. I looked at the documents from the program such as the mission statement and the worksheets that students did as daily assignments.

The first research question of my study was simple and open-ended: *Tell me about the program.* I wanted to hear their everyday experiences and understanding of the program. According to Creswell, the report from such a study should leave the reader with a better understanding of the essential invariant structure or essence of the experience. I believe that I will leave you with a deeper understanding of the GED program as my research participants experience it. These interviewees and site observations subjects were selected to present a multi-layered (thus the inclusion of an instructor, two administrators, and three students) insight into the context of this GED programs. The director of the program was new to this setting while the teacher had eight years experience in this particular GED program. Almost all of the staff, faculty, and students in this discipline are Hispanic so once again this group is representative of this culture in this setting. I also selected this group to represent a spectrum of the age groups and the teaching experience involved in this context.

### ***A community of sympathy, empathy, caring and sharing***

Sympathy, empathy, or simply emotional support for the program, the student, or even just emotional involvement on the part of the teacher, administrator, or staff member emerged as a consistent theme. During the interviews, the subjects of empathy, sympathy, and a general caring attitude surfaced repeatedly from all levels. During my observation periods of classroom

work, it was evident that the students cared deeply for each other, for their teacher, and about the work, they were doing. This community shared their feelings freely with each other. They constantly reassured each other and supported the person next to them through good results and bad. They patted each other on the back about a good score or even a bad one. I saw them give high fives to celebrate test results. Each interview and observation contained more than one reference to emotional support, sympathy, empathy, or just general emotions, which are all manifestations of the rhetorical term *pathos*. Caring seemed to be at the heart of the participants. The caring and empathy that the students talked about registered in the teacher's, administrator's, and staff member's interviews. Empathy and sharing are important to the students according to their interviews. I not only heard them talk of emotions but also saw it demonstrated in the daily exchanges, work sessions, and social interaction of these people.

Julia Vargas\*, one of the students said she felt a different support system at work in this GED program saying, "I like hearing my name read out loud and having the rest of the class congratulate me. It makes me feel good....The students all support each other a lot. We clap and pat each other on the back and we are really happy for each other" (3). The students had obvious regard for their fellow students and their success, which is apparent in their statements. There was a charged element present in the room whenever I saw the students interacting. They were not passive observers or note takers, they shouted out responses or questions throughout the lecture or teaching session. There was evident comfort with the classroom and the lessons as presented by the teacher. They wanted to know what he was saying and how they fit into the material. Relevance was important to them. They talked about wanting material that they could use in their daily lives such as math problems they could use at home or work to figure out things

*\*All names used are pseudonyms to protect the individual's identity.*

such as how much carpeting to buy or the proportions to make an item on a job.

The students also spoke out strongly about the support of the empathy of their instructor who was there to help and also provided a vision of his own life struggle to achieve his position as a teacher. He made them feel that if he could do it, so could they. Carla Munoz said in support of the empathy of the instructor:

I think he understands us because he told us about how bad his youth had been. He understands us because he did not have it perfect either. He was poor just like I was. He was young and foolish and yet he made it to graduate from college so he tells us that we can too. (1-2)

I also heard Mr. Diaz echo the students' opinions of him. He also talked about an emotional tie with his students. He cares about them and tells them that as well as shows them with his teaching techniques. He evidences care for his students' and an understanding of their positions when he tells them that they did not fail school, but that school actually failed them and that he realizes the big sacrifice they are making to be here in the program. Mr. Diaz also spoke of attempting to speak the language that the students speak so they understand him. He was not talking about Spanish or English but more of a vernacular common language base he uses. (Diaz Interview 3). He tells his students "If I had made a different turn sometime in my past, I would be sitting in my classroom. So yes, there is *carnalismo* (brotherhood) because we share a same vision" (Diaz Interview 3). He felt and believed that his students truly felt a kinship with him through his sharing of his own youthful experiences. The students all mentioned the sharing that the teacher did with them about his own youth as being important to them. They felt as if he were one of them, on their side, and truly a comrade in arms as they attacked not only the lessons

but their hard life decisions to return to school for an education. They valued his life experience and modeled their own lives on his. If he could succeed, then they could, too.

### *Identity and Self Esteem*

Each person seemed concerned with his or her identity and credibility in the program. Each seemed concerned with other's perceptions of them and their own self-esteem that was somehow validated by this program and had not been by their previous educational encounters. Using this theme seemed to be particularly evident in the interviews when students or the instructor talked about the program and their belonging to it.

I even evoked my identity when I was attempting to establish my credentials and credibility to be in this culture doing this research. Mr. Diaz, the teacher, presented his credentials to me in the first few lines of his interview telling me that he has a BA degree in Spanish Sociolinguistics from Temple University. He went on to say also, "I am passionate on issues of social justice" (Diaz Interview 1). These two points establish his credentials and his character before we really even got into the interviewing process because they seem to be important to him. He later made sure to tell me that he was in charge of the classroom and that the students knew not to interrupt him (Diaz Interview 4). He makes it clear to the students and to me as the interviewer that it is important for him to be seen as a man of character and value by his students and others.

I heard from the students that they felt that they were displaying good character in their work. Obviously, their characters had changed from her high school experience to this GED program. They credited that change to coming from inside themselves. They had changed and matured. One student said, "I am more mature now and practical" (Vargas 2). She accredited her success to her desire to do well, to listening to the teacher, to wanting to be smarter to be able

to get a better job. Eventually she wants to attend community college after completing the GED preparation course and passing the test. These future plans attest to her character also. She also spoke of believing that she can succeed because the teacher points out how well she is doing in such a short time in the program and that he always announces the highest grades on practice tests. She is proud of her work. (Vargas 3). Pride was another characteristic of *ethos* that the students described. Another student also talked about her identity and *ethos* when she told me to use her real name in the paper because “I am very proud of everything I am doing here in this program and with my life. I am finally on the right track. It took me some time but I am heading for success now” (Munoz 1). She obviously has her fundamental values in line while doing this program and with her life in general. She is proud of the changes she is making by participating in this GED program. Her character is proven by the success she is having by working so hard on the program. I am able to feel and experience her pride with her and see the other students’ reactions to her success. They are completely supportive. They see her success as a chance for their own success. They can imagine the day that their name will be called out for having the high scores as Carla’s name was. They stand with her in the limelight of success.

### ***Literacy and knowledge***

I found time after time, that the basic educational elements were the issue of the classroom conversations, work sessions, and social setting. These students were well aware of the seriousness of the task before them, which was remediation of their previous experiences in their lives. The knowledge was at the core of all they did and studied and all that they were there for in the first place. These students knew what they were doing in school something they had not understood perhaps when they first attended high school.

I found that while the students seemed a little shy to talk about knowledge that they did bring up the topic in round about ways. Jose Gomez said, “The program helps me to read the paper, do some math, write a little, read sections of tests and answer questions. It teaches me the right way to do things” (2). Without using the word knowledge, that is what Gomez was referring to in the educational skills he listed. Knowledge gained in the program as reading skills and class work could then be knowledge shared. All of the students expressed their feelings that the material was more meaningful to their lives and more useful in daily situations. They could imagine using this education while they had not been able to do that in regular programs in high school.

The director of the program Juan Gutierrez addressed the knowledge base for this program when he said:

We are not bound by stringent testing requirements that traditional schools are. There are no TAKS objectives or TEKS curriculum. Scientific research based programs are tedious for many students. Many of these students had language problems that prohibited them from succeeding. (3)

The knowledge contained in this course or program is different from high school programs that are more strictly mandated by state rules and regulations. The program is thus freer to present only the relevant material for passing the GED test. Gutierrez recognizes that in this culture on the border, language difficulties often are a problem for students. Without constant constraints of rules and regulations, this program was able to serve the students better and more completely. The curriculum was developed to meet literacy and knowledge standards considered basic adult levels of learning necessary to survive in the real world. That made the knowledge more meaningful and useful to the students.

### *Motivation as a factor*

The fourth theme that emerged was motivation, which is closely tied to the first three themes. What urged these students on to not only success in the program but simply to be involved in the first place in a mostly voluntary program? What kept them going through study that could not be easy for people who had already dropped out of traditional educational systems? These students were very vocal about their motivation in the interviews and I felt that this theme had to be a part of the findings of this study since it was so important to them as noted by their comments that I will share in the main portion of this report.

The fourth theme surprised me somewhat in that it was not something I expected to hear a lot about in these interviews but the participants were very attuned to motivation. Overwhelmingly, this was a highly motivated group, which surprised me from the demographics of this group. All were dropouts from high school, most at an early age. They had not been motivated then but apparently, things in their lives and their character had changed.

All of the students reflected the views of the group who all wanted a better job. They also spoke about education not being important to them before this but with the hope of a better job; they were willing to try to do this program. Julia Vargas echoed this statement of wanting to get a better job before coming to the program and getting her GED. She also stated that she wanted to be a role model for her children. That is motivation from the heart. (Vargas 1) She also spoke of making herself work hard because she realized that this work is important for her success in the real world. Many of the students used the word “real” as if the educational experiences they had before this program had not been real for them or to them. This experience was hands on and contained day-to-day information and skills that these people realized was vital to their success in life.

The support teacher for assessment, Rosa Sanchez, spoke of the program being voluntary for most of the students. She noted, however, that the work force students come because of a contract with the state work force that sends them to get job skills. She spoke of the program's motivation to keep the students in class and succeeding because "We received funds dependent on enrollment and attendance...Without progress, we do not get the same amount of money so success is very important to the students and to us and to the entire program" (Sanchez 2). She also told me that the program was free and that they take all students no matter how low the scores are which makes the program easily accessible to the students and is motivational in that ease.

Mr. Diaz uses several philosophies, which he says, has worked wonders in his classroom towards motivation. Another personal philosophy that he uses "is connecting with the students as individuals or being there" (Diaz Interview 3) His sharing of troubled times is used as a motivational device to the students, letting them know that he made it so they can also. The administrator told me that the courses are designed to fit the requirements of the students so I believe that is a motivational factor (4). High school is more one size fits all. Here they can find out what the student is missing and fill those needs. Mr. Gutierrez also addressed the issue of volunteer students and contract students sent by the state work force. "...volunteer students come to us for whatever reason to obtain literacy training and GED required elements. The contract students make up about 20% of our population at any given time and the volunteers are the other 80%" (Gutierrez 2). He also spoke about class sizes being large but with only a 50% attendance rate the classes wind up being much smaller than in traditional schools (Gutierrez 5). This smaller class size would help with motivation and student success from having more access to the instructor. Three of the groups participants spoke of the people receiving a voucher of \$65

towards the \$75 fee to take the GED if they score well on the practice tests and have good attendance. Money is always motivational especially in an economically challenged community.

***Interpretation: rhetorical context***

What I found was that four categories or themes emerged from the interviews, observations, and documents that I examined. Three of the four themes are directly from classical and modern rhetoric, and the fourth, I contend is a result of the other three operating together. *Logos*, along with *ethos* and *pathos*, make up a means of persuasion called *pisteis*, or kinds of appeals affecting an audience. *Logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* are completely different, yet, they all correlate. *Logos* is the knowledge or reason within a source. *Ethos* moves an audience by proving the credibility of the speaker; *pathos* stimulates the feelings of the audience and seeks change in their attitudes and actions; and *logos*, along with *ethos* and *pathos*, mobilize the powers of reasoning (Covino & Jolliffe 17). *Pathos* is that element of rhetoric that involves the emotions of the speaker and his or her audience and includes both our modern words from its root: sympathy and empathy (feeling for or with someone else). *Pathos* in situated rhetoric persuades the audience through emotions, either positive or negative, to either some action or decision desired by the person speaking. The speaker uses pathetic appeals to his/her own purposes. The dictionary definition of *ethos* is “The disposition, character, or fundamental values peculiar to a specific person, people, culture, or movement” (Anthony Burgess). The third theme I interpreted was *logos*, the actual knowledge involved in the program of study and the educational opportunities that the students were receiving from the instructor. The dictionary definition of *logos* is “reason that in ancient Greek philosophy is the controlling principle in the universe” (Merriam-Webster). In general, the term has come to mean knowledge. A speaker or writer must consider all three means of persuasion if he is to convince the audience of the

conclusion he wants them to believe or to act. Motivation, the fourth interpreted theme is a result of the first three acting in concerted effort to create motivation. I would contend that this motivation is a by-product of the first three interpreted themes: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.

My research in this context led me to the conclusion that rhetoric was at work in this culture within the ideological, personal, professional and social interactions of the people involved. The authors of the textbook, *The Rhetorical Tradition*, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg support my contention: “Twentieth-century theories of rhetoric, in formulating the relationships between language and knowledge and in reexamining the powers of discourse, have extended the concerns of rhetoric to include each and every instance of language use” (1202). This simply says that rhetoric consists of the relationships between our language and knowledge and the use of language in our daily experience. This is exactly what this research studied—the language that participants use about this program. I examined the situational positions of rhetorical grammar in the context of this GED program to give me a better understanding of what rhetorical elements are important to this environment and how they affect the people working within this context. The everyday language usage is the phenomenological approach that I traced through the daily experiences of the students, instructor, administrator, and staff member through the work they do to determine their understanding and appreciation of the program.

While examining the rhetorical situations within the context of this GED program, I concluded that I needed to use a modern definition of rhetoric that I have pursued in other courses. In their textbook, Bizzell and Herzberg speak of twentieth century rhetoric and use a quote from Garver’s introduction to Jacques Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomena*, “...rhetoric, released from bondage of tropes and figures, is ‘not a matter of pure form but has to do with the relation of language to the world (to life) through the relation of linguistic expressions to the

specific circumstances in which their use makes sense’” (1188). This means simply that rhetoric is not some abstract concept but truly only the dynamic use of language within the very fiber of our everyday experiences and that we must understand that language and take notice of it to make sense of our conversations, daily experiences, and educational opportunities.

### *Conclusions*

Within the context or culture I am studying, rhetoric is the relation of language to that world that makes the context make sense. Each situation that I studied included rhetorical grammar points from the instructor’s lessons to the students’ responses. *Ethos, pathos, and logos* were involved in their everyday contact. Another point that Bizzell and Herzberg made was that “Twentieth-century theories of rhetoric, in contrast, take the concerns of rhetoric to be nothing less than the foundations of knowledge and ideology in discourse” (1202). The process of knowledge making and ideology were apparent in the classroom situations and in the computer conferences labs that I studied, as I delineate in the body of this paper.

I demonstrate that rhetoric is truly a part of all that we write and say. My contention is supported by the theory that “The story of rhetorical theory in the twentieth century is, to a considerable extent, the story of ... the richness of rhetoric as a theory of language in use” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1188). What we say and how we say it is rhetoric simply that and nothing more so we must study the use of language to understand the bigger theories and issues of the world. That is exactly what I have done in this research is to study the language and its use in the interviews and during the observations. Language is the way we communicate without language we would not truly be human.

This GED preparatory program was indeed full of meaning, empathy, identity markers, knowledge and literacy issues that interpret into the basic elements of rhetoric—persuasive

language and argument. These findings make it even more important for me to study rhetoric to understand people at all levels of literacy and education in our society. As I see the language usage, it is all rhetorical which is something that rhetoricians claim but usually are hard pressed to prove. I believe this study proves that all things are rhetorical in examination of their components and constituents.

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