"The Modes" - Cause and Effect

Part I. Overview of the classroom practice

The art of rhetoric has existed for a long time in various forms of human thinking and negotiation. In classical Greece in the fifth century B.C.E., Aristotle laid the self-conscious foundations for classical rhetorical theory. The history of rhetorical study is also the origin of the development of “the modes” of persuasion.

John and Takis Poulakos examine together Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and the discussion on the causes of human action. Every action of every person is either due to the person or to some other cause. Actions caused by a person are due either to habit or to craving (1. rational – for something good, or 2. irrational – source is either anger or desire). Actions not due to the person are due either to chance, or compulsion or nature). An action is due to habit when it can be determined that it has been done often before. Actions are due to reasoning when they are done because they appear useful either as ends in themselves or as means to an end (Poulakos 25-6).

Edward Corbett, (*Emeritus Professor of English, Ohio State University*) asserts that: “the thesis we formulate serves as an objective for the discourse we intend to compose. It specifies the idea we would like to “put across” to others. In argumentative discourse, the thesis indicates the truth or proposal that we want our audience to accept or act upon. But how do we get others to accept our point of view? How do we get others, in Kenneth Burke’s terms, to “identify” with us? (Corbett 38).

Aristotle said that we persuade others by three means: (1) by the appeal to their reason (*logos*); (2) by the appeal to their emotions (*pathos*); (3) by the appeal of our personality or character (*ethos*). Corbett states that: “We may use one of these means exclusively or predominantly, or we may use all three. Which of these means we use will be partly determined by the nature of the thesis we are arguing, partly by current circumstances, partly (perhaps mainly) by the kind of audience we are addressing.” (39).

Corbett explains that “once the student has a subject and has converted it into a sharply defined thesis, he is faced with the task of developing that subject. If he is engaged in persuasive discourse, he must find “arguments” to develop his subject.” (94).

Aristotle identified the common topics as valuable tools that enhance the study and practice of rhetoric. The Common Topics and their sub-topics include: Definition,
Comparison, Relationship (Cause and Effect and Antecedent and Consequence, etc.),
Circumstance, and Testimony (97).

Corbett explains that: “Just as men have always exhibited a desire to know the nature of things and a curiosity about likeness and differences, so they have always felt the urge to discover the “why” of something. A child exhibits the first glimmerings of rationality when he passes from the stage of asking the question “what” about the world around him to the stage of asking the question “why” (112).

Corbett acknowledges first that cause-and-effect relationships generate many sources of arguments and recognizes that “an effect could have a number of possible causes, but the task is to determine which cause. Secondly, the cause that we assign for an effect must be capable of producing the effect – must be an adequate cause.” Thirdly, once we have a probable and adequate cause for something, we must consider whether there are other adequate causes for the effect. Fourthly, we must consider whether the conditions or circumstances were such that the potential cause could operate (112). Corbett attributes these principles to those discussed in a logic class. He notes that in persuasive discourse, arguments based on causal relationships work in two directions. “We can argue from an effect back to a cause, or we can start with a cause and argue that it will produce a particular effect or effects” (113).

Furthermore, Corbett notes that: “a close conceptual link to the topic of cause-and-effect is the topic of antecedent and consequence (considered a looser form of the cause-and-effect arguments practices in logic). The etymology of the term consequence (the Latin verb sequi, to follow) is the key to an understanding of the way in which rhetoric used this topic. The persuader pursues this line of argument: given this situation (the antecedent), what follows (the consequence) from this? If he can detect a cause-and-effect relationship between the antecedent and consequence, he will avail himself of the relationship to strengthen his case” (115).

John Mackin of the University of Illinois considers that “Causes may tell us more precisely than object structure what purposes it might be used for. Effects will prove specific significance.” Aristotle’s four causes are useful here. His terms were final cause, or purpose intended for the object; material cause, or means available for shaping toward the intended purpose; formal cause, or plan for shaping means to end; and efficient cause, or agent that shapes the materials according to the form in order to achieve the intended purpose - an exhaustive causal analysis for any man-made object.” (Mackin 77).

**Teaching arrangements for Cause and Effect**

“One possibility for opening a cause-effect essay is to “begin with a description of the event or situation” to be analyzed and then to introduce the thesis, which should explain whether the writer will “focus on causes, consequences, or both” (Glenn 450-51). After the introduction, there are various options for arrangement: narrating the causes and effects in chronological order – or, alternately, ordering “the causes emphatically, from least to most important” (450). Depending on the material students are working with, either of these arrangements can be effective, so long as the order remains consistent and
the conclusion is strong, perhaps revealing the “larger or long-term implications” (451). (Glenn, Goldthwaite, Connors 244).

**Part II: Example Assignment**
(please see additional attachment with the class handout and post-class notes)

This semester, my SAGES lead co-instructor and I chose to develop our own cause-and-effect classroom practice exercise in order to emphasize one logical approach that students could use to develop their ideas for the second writing assignment on the *Autobiography* or Bertrand Russell. Our course covers a significant amount of Russell’s life experiences and we wanted to design a classroom practice exercise for an early writing instruction day that precedes the submission of the first draft of the assignment (intended to build persuasive skills and focus on audience engagement).

Our motivation to choose this exercise, originates in our recognition of the importance of the process of teaching students both critical thinking and reading skills to support their cognitive evolution throughout the semester. Our pedagogical commitment is to teach the principles of classical rhetoric, particularly emphasizing the mode of persuasion known as cause-and-effect. As our reading on Russell’s Autobiography spans multiple life stages, the rhetorical exercise of cause-and-effect becomes particularly useful in shaping students’ understanding of the multiple life influences that collectively led Russell to become an accomplished thinker and a world-renowned published writer.

Some of the possible drawbacks with this activity is that it is particularly challenging to identify a linear cause for a complex effect such as why Russell chose to write as a way of expressing and clarifying his ideas. In Russell’s case, he wrote at multiple points in his life and it is not simply to pinpoint one specific event that singularly propelled his lifelong writing journey. In my perspective, both life and change are dynamic ongoing processes, with multiple inter-weaving causes and effects. Therefore, it is difficult to make assertions of behavioral causes and effects, especially in the genre of autobiography, where the critic must inevitably impose her own filter of opinions on the examined situation. Hence, as a teacher, I think that I must be skeptical of student arguments that demonstrate linear logic, and rather encourage “wholistic” logic, where conceptual interdependencies and multiplicities are examined by students in their papers.

**Part III: Annotated Bibliography**


**Online Search Portals:**

Rhetoric Server:


CompPile*:


*Note:* The reference above was not available via KSL or OhioLink, however, I thought it would be interesting to research sometime.
The Life of the Mind
Course #14609, USFS 100, SAGES First Seminar, Fall Semester 2005
Instructors: Alejandro de Acosta (add3@case.edu, 368-2933, Mathematics, Yost 205)
and Monica Dumitriu (mxd2@case.edu, 368-1818, Economics, PBL 276)

Writing Instruction Exercise
Class date: Friday, October 14th, 2005

Classroom Exercise: Cause and Effect relationships in analysis and composition

Brief theoretical background on the Modes: Cause and Effect

The Greek philosopher Aristotle has written a famous treatise On Rhetoric, where he discussed the common topics as sources of argument (persuasion) that can be used in various situations. The word “topic” or “topos” literally means “place”, and Aristotle conceived of the topical system as “places” where one can “find” arguments. In the special rhetorical sense, topic means, “where one looks for an argument”. One of the categories outlined in the Common Topics is that of cause and effect (consequence.) Causal arguments can also back up definitions, especially when it comes to arguing about human motives. Therefore, we label acts and behaviors differently depending on what we think about the doer’s motives. 

Writing Instruction Guidelines:

Rhetorical Situation:
Imagine that you are a colleague of Bertrand Russell, one of the Apostles of the elite Society at Cambridge University in London, England. Think about what you know of Bertrand Russell through the correspondence and memoirs that he has shared with you about his early childhood and adolescence and academic interests.

Form groups of 3-4 and discuss your ideas on structuring a cause and effect mode of argument for why Bertrand Russell was influenced to write as a way to express his ideas and clarify these ideas. You will choose a spokesperson to present your ideas to the class.

Some questions to consider in your group discussion:
What are his intentions in writing? What can you infer happened to Russell when he came into contact with a community of like-minded people who were willing to discuss ideas on any topic? What similarities do you find in Russell’s experiences with the Society at Cambridge and your own intellectual activities within the university?

1 http://www.case.edu/artsci/engl/writing/handouts/common_topics.pdf
Post-class follow-ups by e-mail communication:

Dear SAGES class,

We would like to share with you the notes from the Cause and Effect classroom exercise from last Friday. Here are the 'causes and effects' that you have identified in your groups in class in the context of Ch. 3 of Russell's Autobiography. Please remember that as we progress in our readings, we will have a broader knowledge base of life experiences for Russell to write about and therefore our analysis as readers can extend further into the causality of events and decisions that have influenced his writing career.

Question: Why was BR influenced to write as a way to express his ideas and clarify these ideas?

Cause(s):

* desire to write originated in early childhood, but could not be expressed
* Place (deemed influential) - Cambridge
* meeting like-minded people, interested in open philosophical discussion
* discovery of joy of sharing ideas through communication (written and conversations)
* introspection in early childhood

Effect(s):

* developed habit of writing
* developed habit of sharing ideas
* this led to profuse writing on many ideas in adulthood
* propensity to share ideas as an adult in conversations, etc.

Please let us know if you would like to discuss this Cause and Effect exercise further or have questions on the handout or how you can apply this mode of writing (cause & effect format) in formulating your arguments for the editor of Rutledge for your second writing assignment.

Good luck!