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One Month, One Class, No Bags

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One Month, One Class, No Bags
An Analysis of Our Class Project
(Below is the script from our presentation.)

What is Rhetoric?

Many of us have probably heard the term “rhetoric” being used in the news; typically referenced to as a “politicians’ rhetoric”. But what exactly is rhetoric? The word can trace its origin to Ancient Greek times, when philosophers—such as Aristotle, and Socrates—would practice and teach persuasive oratory and the means of constructing a successful argument. According to *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, by Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, rhetoric was used “to make decisions, resolve disputes, and deliberate publicly about important issues.” This definition is quite different from how rhetoric is perceived today. Overtime, rhetoric has adopted a negative connotation. What once was viewed as the act of persuasive argumentation is now seen as a fancy language used to distort the truth or present alternative facts. But, as our English composition class learned last semester, rhetoric is so much more than politicians yelling in each other’s faces.

Invention

The first step to the rhetorical process, according to Aristotle, is invention; the previously cited text defines Invention as “finding and displaying the available arguments on any issue.” During this step, we used what is known as the stasis theory. The stasis theory allows us to find the place of disagreement in an argument and create a plan on how to address it. Stasis Theory is made up of four components:

1. Conjecture- In the first step we look at a discourse community and see if an issue exists
2. Definition- Once an issue has been identified, the next step is to define it: what is the common ground what does it imply?
3. Quality- The third step is determining whether it is good or bad? Right or wrong?
4. Policy- Once all those steps have been processed we then determine what action should be taken to address the issue.

The Proposal

For the proposal part of the class, each student was told to choose a subject that we felt warranted change. This would cover the first three parts of the stasis theory -- Conjecture, Definition, and Quality. We would then present the idea and our solution to the problem. For my proposal, I (Amy George) decided to tackle plastic bag pollution. Using less plastic has always been a personal goal of mine, so I automatically knew this is what I wanted to focus on. This was also around the time that Greta Thunberg was gaining traction for her climate change activism. Therefore, as we had learned in class, kairos the opportune moment, it was the perfect time to present an argument against the use of plastic. Some research I came across putting together the proposal was that last summer, a plastic bag tax was proposed and shut down in the state of Illinois. The goal of my proposal would therefore be to get across legislation for the banning of plastic bags. In order to write a compelling argument, I looked into some of the facts, as well as what could be done realistically by our class. Most of the information I found talked about the terrible consequences of using and producing plastic

bags. There was also information on places with successful plastic bag bans or taxes. Therefore, with this research, I thought that it would be more plausible if we, as a class, tried to get legislation passed if not in Illinois, then at least in the DuPage county.

The Research

Typically, in a class, students are given an argument and they find evidence/research to agree or refute the argument. In our class, we first found the research and then built an argument around that research.

As primary research, our class participated in what we called the “Plastic Bag Challenge”. For one month, each student tried to not use plastic bags. We recorded episodic videos detailing our experiences during the challenge and, as the month went by, we discovered various conflicts and obstacles. Other sources for primary research included interviews and surveys sent to people in Illinois concerning the plastic bag issue. Notably, one of our polls had 1,870 responses, which helped us get a better idea of the citizen’s perspective.

For secondary research, we split into several groups to gather information from academic, historical, and scientific sources. We focused on the context of the issue, its history, the current situation, successful cases, grocery store chains, and counterarguments.

Our research led us to the conclusion that the best way to address the issue would be to argue in support of a plastic bag ban in the state of Illinois.

Arrangement

The next step in our rhetorical process was Arrangement. *The Rhetorical Tradition*, by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, defines arrangement as “the organization of the parts of a speech to ensure that all the means of persuasion are present and properly disposed of.” The arrangement of our project, which was composed of a video and a website, followed the classical argument structure that we learned in class. The Classical argument is composed of seven parts:

1. Exordium: places our audience into our intended emotional state
2. Introduction: explains the exordium and makes it important
3. Narration: clarifies the issue at hand
4. Partition: acts as a preview statement; it works as a road map of our argument
5. Confirmation: the presentation of arguments with research
6. Refutation: the counter arguments and refutes them
7. Peroration/ Conclusion: where we summarize our argument and provide a lasting moment that will stick with the audience we are trying to persuade.

The Video

Since the plan was to structure the video using the classical argument model, our video was comprised of three sections:

Introduction: relating the problem of plastic and its prevalence in everyday life

Argument: the vlogs from students proving that life without plastic is doable

Conclusion: the recap of the argument and invitation to participate in plastic-free living

We initially planned to use our vlogs to create the argument. After deciding that the quality was collectively poor, we assembled quotes from various vlogs and scripted a set of interviews to be performed by five members from the class. This performance summarized the experience of the class as a whole, based on content from individual vlogs. Two groups handled the video production; another group handled the interviews. To complement the interviews, a second group of people creative a narrative surrounding the use of plastic in our everyday lives; shots were filmed at and around a nearby Walmart, beginning with a shopping scene and ending with plastic bags being used to load groceries.

Narration was recorded at the school's media lab. The video was assembled based on the classical argument model; the introduction contained our Walmart narrative as well as b-roll of newsflashes and pollutive industries. This covered the exordium, introduction, and narrative. The argument consisted of the interviews, arranged completely and consecutively. The video diaries presented evidence for both the confirmation and refutation of our argument. The conclusion used images of class members with reusable bags, and narration inviting the audience to take action and make a change.

The Website

Aside from the video, our class also created a website. The website was meant to be a place where our audience could find more extensive information on the issue of plastic bag consumption. Each page on our website represented a part of the classical argument:

- Home Page: Exordium
- About Us: Introduction and Narrative statement
- Our Goal: Partition
- Why It's Possible and FAQ: Confirmation and Refutation
- What Can You Do?: Peroration

The Results

After a week of sharing the video across multiple social media platforms, we decided to analyze the viewer data and feedback we had so far. The results were pretty dismal, the viewings of the video drastically dropped after the first 2 minutes. We were also unable to retrieve data from the website, so we could not tell how successful it was. This along with the lack of authentic and detailed feedback from friends and family made it clear that something we did or failed to do caused people to lose interest in what we had to say.

What Went Wrong?

Framework -- The Classical Argument Structure:

Our framework dictated that both the video and the website function as complete arguments for the premise of our project. The video was intended to complement the website; persuade the audience using the video, then direct them to take action by visiting our website for more information. This dependence on the classical argument structure cost us our audience retention and made much of the website redundant. Instead, the video and website should each have accomplished pieces of the overall argument together:

- The video serves as the exordium; we convey the problem/issue in a compelling manner so as to leave the audience wanting more information.

- We then direct the audience to find more information on our website, in which the complete data and call to action would be presented.