

In Memoriam: Lloyd Bitzer (1931–2016)

Kathleen Blake Yancey

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Dear Lloyd—

It was with such sadness that I learned of your death. *Wikipedia* calls you an American rhetorician, which of course you were, and of the first order, but when, as a nascent doctoral student, I met you—through your texts, as academics do—I didn't think of you in such exalted terms. I thought of you as one of the many scholars I encountered and learned from in a class on contemporary rhetoric.

That class, one I took as a doctoral student, was memorable in several ways. I was specializing in Rhetoric and Composition, a hard task in an English department that didn't recognize either. Composition, probably because of the teaching, seemed within reach, rhetoric much less so. Precisely because I didn't know much about rhetoric, I thought I should. In 1979, the English department at Purdue, where I was taking my degree, offered no courses in rhetoric; happily, I found a rhetoric course in Communication Studies, (literally) down the hall and (yet) around the world from English. Taught by Professor Don Burks, the class widened my world. We'd begin each class with the same question. "Where is meaning?" Dr. Burks would ask. "In people," the students chorally replied, all but me. I was too astonished: in English, meaning was in texts. We read the scholarship of multiple contemporary rhetoricians, Douglas Ehninger, Henry Johnstone, and you among them. We wrote about rhetoric informally and formally, and I struggled to give it a definition.

Just like that class widened my world, "The Rhetorical Situation" helped me re-frame it. Such a simple title, such an important concept: the role that situation plays in shaping rhetoric. Rhetorical situation was, for me at least, a kind of threshold concept, transforming how I understood not only rhetoric, but also life itself, oriented to exigence, bounded by constraints, avail-

able for various kinds of action. Rhetorical situation articulated the classroom situation where I met you, expressed the classroom situation where I taught, framed potential rhetorical opportunities outside of school. I began asking students to think in terms of rhetorical situation, that is, to think explicitly about their writing tasks in terms of a rhetorical situation: What's the purpose, who is the audience, what is the topic, and what role are you playing as author? To me, this was all such new, heady stuff. What I didn't appreciate at the time was how new the concept was for all of us, even for you. The class was held in 1979; "The Rhetorical Situation" had been published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* a mere eleven years earlier, in 1968.

Not everyone agreed with your approach, of course, even as they appreciated the salience of a rhetorical situation. Some claimed that you had it backwards: the situation didn't evoke rhetoric, as you had it, but rather was created by the rhetor him or herself. Others claimed that the situation, as it were, was considerably more complex and nuanced: while both situation and rhetor matter, it is the ability of the rhetor to bring the topic, audience, and situation together that is the rhetorical task. Most recently, rhetorical situation has been re-contextualized through the concept of ecologies: rhetorical situations aren't discrete so much as contributors to and participants in larger flows and fluxes. Still, the concept of the rhetorical situation prevails—and in so many ways. It's commonly used in writing programs; it's invoked in the WPA Outcomes Statement; it's critical for any course in rhetoric. Put more generally, the rhetorical situation is now a key concept for college students developing as writers and studying rhetoric. That kind of influence? It's heady stuff.

The rhetorical situation has also been useful in my scholarship, even—or perhaps especially—in research in fields quite apart from rhetoric proper. In "The Rhetorical Situation of Writing Assessment," for example, I invoke two definitions of the rhetorical situation—yours and a repurposed definition—to theorize the relationship between writing assessments and the rhetorical situations that might invoke, inform, or respond to them. More specifically, I propose two ways of thinking about writing assessment. One: relying on what I called the *local exigence*, what you describe as an occasion or imperfection requiring response, all writing assessment is local. Because exigences are local, what appears as the same practice isn't; it varies to accommodate those local exigences, as we see in the case of a particular kind of assessment, Directed Self Placement (DSP), where versions of DSP across a range of institutions (e.g., Colgate, Southern Illinois, and Grand Valley) differ. Two: relying on what I called a *self-created exigence* operating outside of the local, scholars working collaboratively can design an exigence to guide inquiry. In this case, I identify two portfolio-related

projects, Portnet and the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, whose purposes were quite similar: to include the needs, or exigences, of individual campuses but in the context of an emerging field as *its own rhetorical situation* with its own concerns and questions locating the research. The larger group thus identifies situations seeming to have enough commonality that they constitute a larger, more generic rhetorical situation; such a situation includes a self-designed exigence motivating a rhetorical response. All of this I saw only in the fullness of time: participating in Portnet and in the Coalition, I didn't think in terms of a rhetorical situation, but in retrospect, that concept helps me understand it as critical for shared endeavors. As important, it helps me understand how such an approach can prompt new inquiries.

All of these musings are invoked, of course, by the rhetorical situation of your death, dear Lloyd. Although I never met you or corresponded with you or even saw you give a talk, your rhetorical situation dramatically shifted the way I experience the world. Profoundly, it has shaped the ways many of us in Rhetoric and Composition understand rhetoric—and the ways we teach and research.

For that and more, we thank you.

—kathleen blake yancey
Florida State University

Kathleen Blake Yancey, Kellogg W. Hunt Professor of English and Distinguished Research Professor at Florida State University, a public R1 institution, has served as the elected leader of several writing studies or literacy organizations, including the Council of Writing Program Administrators. Immediate Past Editor of College Composition and Communication, she has published over 100 refereed articles and book chapters and authored, edited, or co-edited 14 scholarly books, including Delivering College Composition; Writing Across Contexts; and A Rhetoric of Reflection. She has been recognized with several awards, including the CWPA Best Book Award and FSU Graduate Mentor Award.