Knowledge, Belief, and the Role of Rhetoric

This mini-module is designed as a follow-up to "Three Ways to Persuade: Integrating the Three Appeals." It introduces additional Aristotelian concepts, explores the distinction between knowledge and belief, and helps students understand the role that rhetoric plays in negotiating between the two. Students will gain experience in surfacing unexamined assumptions in their own thinking and in that of others.

The habits of mind developed in this module are important components of a defense against what has been called "fake news" or "alternative facts." The process of surfacing assumptions behind beliefs can facilitate greater understanding between disagreeing parties. The end result of such a discussion might well be, "I don't agree, but I see why you think that."

As part of this process, students will apply ethos, pathos, and logos to various problems to discover which of the appeals is the most persuasive in the context they are working within. The writing task asks students to analyze a problem in their school or community and write up a list of talking points for leaders as to what they should say and do about it. The "Talking Points" assignment requires developing a list of strong arguments that could be used in an op-ed, a speech, a meeting, or other situation. Students may perceive this assignment as easier than writing an essay because in a sense it is a kind of prewriting, but it requires rigorous thinking.

This is a concept module without a central text, so it is not organized in the normal ERWC-style Reading Rhetorically, Connecting Reading to Writing, Writing Rhetorically pattern. In this sense, the module itself is the text.

Learning Goals

Students will be able to:

- Make distinctions between certain knowledge, belief, and opinion

- Understand the role of rhetoric in matters where we do not have certain knowledge

- Assess the effectiveness of different rhetorical appeals in different situations

- Surface assumptions in their own thinking and in that of others

- Write a list of rhetorically effective "talking points" regarding a specific issue or problem that demonstrates their understanding of the previous outcomes

Activating Background Knowledge

Activity 1: A Mistaken Belief

Have you ever believed something to be true, only to find out later that it wasn't? Perhaps you thought a particular product was the best, but it wasn't. Or you found out that a person you know was lying about something, or behaved differently than you expected, or that their reputation did not reflect who they really were. Perhaps you thought a particular food was good for you, but it turned out not to be. We all have many beliefs that turn out not to be true. Answer the following questions:

- What was the belief that turned out not to be true?

- Why did you believe it was true?

- How did you find out that it wasn't? What convinced you?

Share your answers with a partner. Discuss what you learned from your experience. What advice would you

give others, based on your experience?

Exploring Key Concepts

Activity 2: Knowledge versus Belief

The difference between knowledge and belief is an important question in the history of rhetoric. Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, defines rhetoric as the art of "finding the available means of persuasion." Plato, who was Aristotle's teacher, argues against rhetoric because he says it persuades the audience to belief, not true knowledge, and could be used to make people believe things that were not true. In the dialogue called *Gorgias*, Plato has the famous sophist (or rhetorician) Gorgias define rhetoric as "the art of persuasion in courts of law and other assemblies about the just and unjust." Plato then has Socrates ask Gorgias, "Which sort of persuasion does rhetoric create in courts of law and other assemblies about the just and unjust, the sort of persuasion which gives belief without knowledge or that which gives knowledge?" Gorgias answers, "Clearly, Socrates, that which only gives belief." This exchange leads to some important philosophical questions. Discus these questions with your partner:

1. What is the difference between "knowledge" and "belief"?
2. Is "proving" different from "persuading"? Does "proving" lead to knowledge, while "persuading" leads to belief? How do we "prove" that something is true? Are there some notions that we believe strongly, even though we can't prove them?
3. What is the difference between what is certain and what is probable? If, as in a courtroom, the jury decides that something has been proved "beyond a reasonable doubt," does that mean that it is certainly true or merely highly probable? Are we persuaded only by what is certain or sometimes by what is probable, in that it is likely to be true, or that most people would agree that it is true?
4. In the dialogue mentioned above, Gorgias says that rhetoric is about the "just and unjust." How would you distinguish a "just" action from an "unjust" action? (The word "just" here is related to the word "justice." A "just" action is one that is morally right and fair.) Can you think of an action that you would consider to be "unjust"?
5. Is it wrong to persuade someone to believe something that might not be true? Is the use of rhetorical strategies a bad thing, a tool of deception, as Plato argues?

Thinking about the discussion you had about the questions above, write a short paragraph answering the following questions:

> Did the experiences you described in Activity 1 involve persuasion of any kind? Did someone persuade you to believe the false thing? Did someone later persuade you that the false thing was actually false?

Activity 3: Exploring Key Concepts

The following concepts are important in thinking about the problem of belief versus knowledge. Take a moment to read the definitions to see if they make sense to you:

Persuasion—Using words or actions to encourage someone to believe or do something

Knowledge—Knowing with certainty that something is true

Belief—Accepting with confidence or faith that something is true, with or without evidence

Opinion—A view not necessarily based on fact or evidence

Probability—The likelihood that something is true based on experience

Think about how we make decisions in our daily lives. Which concept is the most common basis for our decisions? Which concept is the least common basis? Using "1" for most common and "5" for least common, rank the five concepts. Then share your rankings with a partner to see if you agree. Discuss any differences.

Activity 4: Choosing an Issue

Let's apply the concepts above to a specific situation so we can see how they work in practice. To do this, as a class, choose a current controversial event such as a murder, a scandal, a celebrity divorce, or other prominent news item. Your teacher may make some suggestions and students can suggest others. Choose an issue where people disagree about the facts, the words used to describe the issue or event, the meaning of the event, or what to do about it. Once you have a list of possibilities, at least three or four, the class can vote on the issue they want to explore.

Once you have an issue, read some articles and posts online about it. When you have read or skimmed at least three or four things, you are ready for Activity 5.

Activity 5: Applying the Concepts

After reading some material about your issue or event, fill out a chart with six cells labeled as in the example below.

What I know for certain	How do I know it?
What I believe	Why do I believe it?
What is probable	Why do I think so?
In my opinion, they should . . .	On what do you base your opinion?

After filling out your chart, share it with your partner to see if you had similar ideas and came to similar conclusions. You will probably find that when you came to different conclusions, it is because you made different assumptions.

Activity 6: Clarifying Assumptions

Aristotle calls arguments that are based on assumptions instead of certain facts "enthymemes" or "rhetorical

syllogisms." What we call them doesn't really matter, but in daily life, most of the arguments we encounter are based on assumptions. Often, we don't question these assumptions because we ourselves share these assumptions with the speaker or writer. This is normal. If we always waited for certain knowledge, we would never be able to do anything at all.

We make assumptions based on such things as

- The reputations of people, organizations, and news sources
- Identification of particular people as being like us, or unlike us
- Past experiences with related things
- Emotional reactions
- Images and loaded words
- Logic or common sense
- Probability
- Trust or lack of trust in authority
- Political or religious affiliation
- An optimistic or pessimistic outlook
- Prior knowledge related to the issue or event

When you shared your charts in Activity 5, you probably found that where you disagreed, you made different assumptions. To explore this, make a T-chart like the one below. Some examples of the kinds of assumptions people might differ on have been inserted, but you should write down your own assumptions. Do not judge your partner's assumptions. We all make different assumptions based on our background and experience.

Partner A	Partner B
Assumed news source A was more reliable	*Assumed new source B was more reliable*
Assumed that person C was telling the truth	*Assumed that Person C was lying, and person D was telling the truth*
Trusts the police	*Doesn't trust the police*
Knew more about how a factor in the event really works	*Didn't know much about that factor*
Has no relevant experience	*Has relevant experience*

Using the chart above as an example, make a list of the assumptions you made when filling the chart in Activity 5. The column on the right in the previous chart, starting with "How I know it," will give you some clues. After you have made your list, fill out the chart below with your partner. (If you are in a group, you might make your own chart with more columns.)

Partner A	Partner B

Discuss the T-chart you produced. Then answer the following question in a short paragraph:

> How did writing down your knowledge, beliefs, opinions, and assumptions about a specific issue or event and sharing them with a partner affect your understanding of your own thinking processes and the thinking processes of your partner?
>
> You might also think about these questions: Do you think that more sharing of this kind would help our society get along better? Would it be beneficial to our society if we could at least get to the point where we can say, "I still don't agree with you, but I understand why you think that way"? Why or why not?

Activity 7: Which Appeal is More Effective?

So far, we have demonstrated that readers make different assumptions about speakers, writers, sources, issues, words, values, and many other factors when they read texts and view images. How can writers and speakers attempt to control the assumptions that their readers and listeners make? From Aristotle's perspective, it is all about the three appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos. (Note: If you don't know the words "ethos, pathos, and logos," please read the related article "Three Ways to Persuade: Integrating the Three Appeals" by John R. Edlund.) In a nutshell, something like this:

> Ethos: Aspects of the text that cause the reader to think positively of the writer or speaker.
>
> Pathos: Aspects of the text that engage the emotions of the reader or listener.
>
> Logos: Aspects of the text that encourage the reader or listener to follow a chain of reasoning.

Let's go back to the list of factors that lead to assumptions from Activity 6 and connect them to the relevant appeal. I have done some of them for you:

- The reputations of people, organizations, and news sources **(ethos)**
- Identification of particular people as being like us, or unlike us
- Past experiences with related things
- Emotional reactions
- Images and loaded words
- Logic or common sense
- Probability
- Trust or lack of trust in authority
- Political or religious affiliation
- An optimistic or pessimistic outlook **(pathos)**
- Prior knowledge related to the issue or event **(logos)**

For particular issues or events, particular appeals may be more or less effective. Let's look at some examples.

Sometimes we debate about something that is not a fact, but a value or a preference. Let's look at how the three appeals might be used in such a case:

Claim: My favorite song is better than yours!

With a partner, imagine that you have different favorite songs. (You can share your favorite songs or favorite musical artists at the moment, but this is not essential to the activity.) In making this kind of argument, which kind of appeal is more likely to be effective in persuading the audience that the speaker's song is the best? Rate the arguments 1-3 in terms of effectiveness, with 1 being most effective and 3 being least.

Claim: My favorite song is better than yours!			
Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Establish that I am knowledgeable about music	*I play trumpet in the school band.*	
Pathos	This song has positive effects on the listener's mood.	*When I feel lonely, this song cheers me up more than any other.*	
Logos	Establish the expertise of the musicians.	*The lead singer went to Julliard (a famous music school).*	

Activity 8: Arguing about Homelessness

Now let's take a more complicated example than a favorite song. Let's say that businesses and homeowners in a community are complaining that there are too many homeless people on the streets. One politician wants to build more homeless shelters, but his opponent wants to increase enforcement of laws against sleeping in public places. Rate the arguments 1-3 in terms of effectiveness, with 1 being most effective and 3 being least.

Position: More Homeless Shelters			
Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Build credibility with constituents	*I have lived in this community all my life. I care about all its citizens.*	
Pathos	Characterize homeless people and why they are homeless	*People are homeless for many reasons. The loss of a job, an unexpected medical bill, or the onset of mental illness can make whole families suddenly homeless.*	

Logos	Show that my solution will be effective	*Shelters get people off the street and can provide services that will help them get back on their feet and become productive members of society. Enforcing laws against sleeping on the street will just make them go elsewhere for a while.*	

Position: Enforce Laws Against Sleeping in Public Places			
Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Build credibility with constituents	*I have operated businesses in this community for more than 20 years.*	
Pathos	Characterize homeless people and why they are homeless	*Homeless people are a blight on our community. Employment is at an all time high. There are many jobs. Many people choose to be homeless because they are too lazy to work, so they beg.*	
Logos	Show that my solution will be effective	*Cities that enforce laws against public sleeping have a reduced homeless population. It's a fact!*	

After you fill out your charts, discuss which side would be most persuasive.

Activity 9: Water Pollution

Let's take another example to explore how ethos, logos, and pathos work together. Suppose that the citizens of a city are concerned that their water supply is polluted. The water is sometimes a brownish color and people have been getting sick. A group of people goes to a city council meeting to voice their concerns. If you were the mayor of this city, what strategies would you use to deal with this problem? (Note: This actually happened in Flint, Michigan. See https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/11/health/toxic-tap-water-flint-michigan/index.html and https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/q-a-what-really-happened-to-the-water-in-flint-michigan/). In groups of four or five, consider this problem and fill out the "Actions" section of the following chart:

Purpose: Convince constituents that you are dealing with the problem.			
Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Strategy	Effectiveness
Ethos	Build credibility with constituents	*Emphasize your connections to the community and that the health and welfare of all the citizens is important.*	
Pathos	Address the fears and concerns of your constituents	*Listen to the concerns and express sympathy. Publicly drink a glass of city tap water.*	
Logos	Determine whether the problem is real, and if so, what causes it and how it can be fixed	*Make a plan to investigate and promise to follow up. Send water samples to a lab for analysis. Write a report analyzing the results and recommending a solution.*	

After filling out the chart, discuss whether or not the mayor would be successful if he or she did only one or two of these actions and the ways in which the three appeals work together.

Using Your Knowledge

Activity 10: A Writing Task

For this assignment, you could return to the issue you discussed in Activity 4 or choose a more local problem at your school, in your neighborhood, or something on a bigger scale, such as your city or your state. If you can't think of a problem, you could use the Flint, Michigan example from the previous activity.

When a leader has to speak or write publicly about a problem, he or she will have a member of the staff write up a bulleted list of "talking points." The purpose of the list is to help establish the message and help the leader stay on that message, no matter what questions he or she is asked. This list should have the following:

- A clear purpose. What are we trying to accomplish?

- Arguments that support that purpose, expressed in clear language, short and simple enough to memorize. These arguments should address all three appeals: ethos, pathos, logos. (Just like you have been doing in the charts above.)

- Anecdotes (personal stories) that people can relate to that support the arguments are very useful. Keep them brief, however!

- Points of common ground that both sides can agree on.

- A proposed call to action.

With your issue or problem in mind, imagine that you are a staff member working for a community leader. You have been asked to come up with talking points for an upcoming press conference. Write a one-page list of talking points for your boss.

Gathering Feedback

Activity 11: Read Around Review

This process will help students get feedback and revise their talking points.

1. Students get into small groups of four or five.

2. Each student passes his or her talking points to the right.

3. Using the bullet point list from activity nine, each student considers whether the talking points contain everything on the list, but are also clear, short and simple enough to memorize.

4. Each student writes one comment or question on a sticky note and attaches it to the talking points.

5. Students pass talking points to the right again and repeat the process.

6. Students continue passing the talking points around until the talking points come back to the original writer.

7. The group discusses the talking points they have read. Writers ask questions about the suggestions and questions they received.

8. Individual writers make revisions according to the feedback they received.

Reflecting on Learning

Activity 12: What I Now Know

Write a short paragraph describing what you learned from doing the activities in this module.

Works Cited

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