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The use of common topics in teaching creative writing

Foteini Egglezou

Abstract: The trip to rhetorical topics (plural: *topoi*/*τόποι* in Greek) started during antiquity. Since the era of Aristotle, of Cicero, of Quintilian. It consists of a long and adventurous trip which lasts until today. Topics stand somewhere between the land of formal logic and of persuasion. They are well known as ‘argumentative matrices’ and are closely related to the production of premises and formal arguments. Is this the only truth about them? The modern return of rhetorical studies and the association of rhetoric with the notion of creativity in language use: a) reveal the faded -by the patina of time- relation of rhetorical topics to the invention of ideas and, consequently, to the imaginative operation, b) remind that during antiquity the poetic production was considered as a result of ‘mimesis’ which was influenced by the production of arguments and c) pinpoint the creative value of common topics such as definition, comparison, relationship, testimony etc. in teaching creative writing. In our era, the trip to rhetorical topics has not ended yet. In this paper, we are searching the rhetorical topics on the cusp between logic and imagination, at the point where the certainty of the familiar meets the uncertainty of the unknown. The aim of the paper is twofold: to examine the main aspects and functions of the system of topics and to give emphasis to the use of common topics as a modern, useful, adaptive and applicable tool in classroom for improving both essential components of students creativity such as fluency, flexibility and originality of ideas as well as their creative writing skills in various literary forms.

Keywords: common topics, creative writing, creativity, imagination, language arts.

The unbroken link between rhetoric and creativity

The link between rhetoric and creativity is forged within antiquity. Since the second half of the 5th century BC, rhetoric, as the genesis art of many, various and original ideas, transmutes the thoughts into oral and / or written words, aiming, first, at the discovery of the available means of persuasion and, secondly, at the realization of linguistic creativity. Soon, rhetorical eloquence becomes part of the recognized literature [1] because of the continuous development of public speech in the intellectual and civic life of the era, indicating that the persuasive force of arguments is accompanied by the aesthetics of speech independently of the type of oratory (judicial, deliberative, epideictic).

Among the five canons of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery) the canon of invention is considered the most important in power. Not by accident, Aristotle stresses the inventive character of rhetoric [2]. Diachronically, invention, as a system or method of ideas or arguments discovery [3], results in the comprehension and production of new ideas, arguments, skills, actions and artworks [4]. It is considered as the most important and difficult of the canons (“invention et prima et difficillima est” [5]), since, it can provide “some system and guidance to the present-day fascination with creativity and innovation” [6], [7]. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that, due to invention and its close connection to imagination, the link of rhetoric to creativity becomes unbroken [8]. Every rhetoric speech, every literary work, every oral and / or written text consists of a product of imagination, which is “erected in the mind through the agency of new combinations and relationships . . .” [9].

For the classical rhetorical theory, topics play a very important role in the application of invention. They are defined as “places” [10] where arguments, ideas, subjects for discourse, “recurrent themes in literature” or “heuristic devices that encourage the innovation of ideas” [11] can be located. Topics consist of the “spaces in an art” where the creator, the speaker, the writer may search “the available means of persuasion” [12], while, at the same time, they are recognized as mnemonic devices which facilitate the representation of ideas and, in general, of the reality. Because of their contribution to the inventive process, the use of topics is considered as a critical practice and, consequently, it may be connected to the production of creative written texts. Next, in this paper, after presenting the main aspects of the topic theory, we will attempt to show various examples of creative employment of common topics, in order to strengthen their use to the teaching of creative writing in a classroom.

A brief introduction to topic theory

Although the spatial metaphor of *topoi* points to Aristotle’s *Topics* and *Rhetoric*, the meaning of the term also exists in *Encomium of Helen*, as a guide of Isocrates thought in selecting the appropriate material for his speech. [13]. For Cicero, topics or *topoi* are identified to *loci* and consist of a list of *adtributa*, which help the orator examine better a person or a fact [14], while Quintilian presents them as “seats of arguments, in which they lie concealed, and from which they must be drawn forth” [15].

As a result of Aristotle’s omission to define precisely the term *topoi*, we notice, in the course of time, a plethora of relative definitions. So, topics are defined as “search formulas” of arguments [16], as “stock arguments” [17], as “general lines of arguments” [18], as “principles for the solution of problems of genus, property and accident” [19], [20], as “investigative guides, catalogues of arguments or methods of developing types of discourse” [21], as machines “for making premises” [22], as argumentative matrices [23] and so forth.

However, since the era of Aristotle, and despite the variety of topics definitions, *topoi* are discerned in two main categories: *common* topics and *special* topics. On one hand, common topics offer guiding principles of reasoning and may be applied in the development of any subject. They represent universal modes of human reasoning [24] [25]. For example, people tend to define, to compare, to find relationships among ideas, arguments, artworks, situations. In this way, the main common topics and subtopics are formed: definition, comparison, relationship, circumstance, testimony [26] etc. On the other hand, special topics offer to the speaker and / or writer premises, ideas, arguments, subjects for development which are pertinent to each form of discourse, in order to achieve the desirable persuasion (f.e. the topics of just / unjust, of beautiful / ugly, of good / bad etc.).

Additionally, the above taxonomy indicates two different approaches of topics: a) the *inferential* approach, which refers to common topics and to the process that conduces to the drawing of specific conclusions and b) the *materialist* approach, which, respectively, refers to special topics and the material that offer for the development of various subjects [27].

The two pre-mentioned approaches are connected to the two main functions of topics: a) the *guarantee* function, which warrants the reasoning validity of the mental leap to certain conclusions [28] and b) the *selective* function, which ensures that the invention and the choice of a certain idea, topic or argument is the most appropriate among others [29] because of a certain ‘instruction’ which renders it as such in a specific situation.

Beside to the above functions, we support that, potentially, the common topics, as a useful and adaptive pedagogical tool [30], may serve another important function, the creative, which is related to the development of students creative thinking, speaking and, especially, writing. More precisely, we will attempt to comprehend in which way the teaching of common topics and the familiarization of students with them in the context of language arts lesson, may lead both, teachers and students, to their (re)discovery “as useful devices” [31] in our quest to improve not only the pedagogy of argument but, mainly, the pedagogy of creativity in classroom through the stimulation of students imagination. By accepting Zompetti’s opinion that topics “are more than just connections between premise and conclusion (building arguments) or invention (locating arguments)” [32], we will examine how the knowledge of topics and their intentional use or ‘abuse’ may facilitate students’ imaginative explorations and conduce them to the invention of original ideas for a topic by triggering their creative thinking as well as their written expression. Our thesis is based upon the dual nature both of creativity, as a product of imagination, and of common topics, as essential components of rhetoric and their fortuitous intersection, as it will be discussed below.

The fortuitous intersection of rhetorical topics, imagination and creativity

The approach of rhetorical topics and creativity consists of a complex process due to their special, inherent nature. On the one hand stands the evasive and undefinable notion of creativity. Creativity is mainly conceived through the production (in Ancient Greek ‘ποίησις (In modern Greek the term *ποίησις* corresponds to poetry.)’ <poisis<poiein: to make) of an unprecedented and important artwork which differs from all other types of its ‘genus’ / genre. It may be comprehended as a product of imagination that challenges common sense and experiences in all fields of life, by following rules as originality, genesis of various and interesting ideas as well as problem-solving. Creativity, also, is related to skills such as visualization of ideas, insight of unexpected contingencies and relations among common data, analogical thinking, analysis of data and their reconstruction to a completely new and different whole [33]. Creativity challenges the common logic, but at the same time respects its authority.

On the other hand stands the topics of rhetoric levitating amongst the land of certainty, logical necessity and heavens of social probability, possibility and uncertainty. The affinity of the two spaces is achieved due to 'endoxa' (in Latin: *probabilia*), that is a consequence to social, conceptual and linguistic conventions, which are well accepted in various historical and / or textual contexts. Thus, forming a new kind of logic, a new type of reasoning: rhetorical reason. The rhetorical reason is capable for broadening "the idea of what is reasonable well beyond the analytical, the demonstrative and the calculable" [34]. It contributes to the production of persuasive speech that is not only restricted to the field of argumentation, but, also, it is expanded to every linguistic creation aiming to persuade the audience or the readers about its content, its ideas and sentiments that intends to provoke them. Neither creativity nor rhetorical reason banish rationality. On the contrary, it is supported that even in the literary writing, which is not so strictly bound by syllogistic reasoning, "a poem or story will not be persuasive if its internal logic isn't consistent" [35].

The above remarks lead us to the point of intersection for topics, as components of the art of rhetoric, and for creativity, as spawn of imagination: their dual nature. According to Ricoeur, imagination is characterized simultaneously by two complementary as well as contradictory dimensions. The first dimension is the one "that draws individuals back into constituted matrices, and thus cements their shared beliefs and conventions", while the second one "enables individuals to challenge convention and to refashion the community to which they belong" [36] through their creative expression. Once again, the dual quality of imagination stress its close relation to topics and creativity. To this effect, the imaginative and creative nature of rhetoric is assured through its particular reason, as expressed by the dual nature of topics. As McKeon notes, "the commonplace of commonplaces is the place in which the certainties of the familiar are brought into contact with the transformations of innovation" [37] of speech, of writing, of interpretation of personal experiences, thoughts, actions, ways of comprehending various texts and so forth. Topics as well as creativity result from the generative power which is hidden in them in order to couple the certainty with the uncertainty, the expected with the unexpected and the tradition with the innovation. It is, precisely, the generative power that we intend to liberate in the context of language arts lesson through the creative writing. What's more is that literary creativity consists of an essential form of creative work for children and young adolescents.

The use and the 'abuse' of common topics in creative writing

Traditionally, it is considered that topics are only related to the teaching of arguments and to the development of critical thinking. However, the modern turn to the development of students creative writing may facilitate the (re)discovery of topics and their contribution to the process of writing fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry or drama, while it may enhance, in general, the knowledge of topics and empower their use as an instructional tool. Topics may help students to become skillful masters of writing, to develop and shape their own literary language by providing them with the existing models, since creativity, usually, takes place within limits.

More precisely, creative writing, as "a version of rhetoric" [38] aims at the familiarization of students with writing practices through which they may interfere actively in the environment and recreate it. In any case, through the centuries, rhetoric had always been "the vehicle for what we call active learning, such as writing exercises" [39]. For the rhetorician teachers, the precise knowledge of fixed structures and models has always been considered as necessity "if they are [the structures and models] to be altered and renewed with precision" [40]. Accordingly, Mednick (1976) supports that "the greater the number of associations that an

individual has to the requisite elements of a problem, the greater the probability of his reaching a creative solution” [41]. Indeed, topics, common topics, as addressed in this paper, provide students with y. Let’s enjoy the following creative definition which is inspired by the scientific field of microbiology. The characteristics of the sentiment of love are identified to usual characteristics of viruses:

Unusually resistant virus. Sometimes fatal. The use of antibiotics is not recommended. It may turn out to have the opposite of the desired effect.

Let the virus run its course. [42]

Correspondingly, the common topic of definition of a notion may generate the writing of a prose poem:

*And the poetry: a game
where you loose it all,
for winning, maybe
an unattainable star.*

(Tasos Leivaditis, Greek poet)

We notice that in the case of the creative definition the switching of the *genus* or, in other terms, the “category mistake” [43] conduces, automatically, to a paradox attribution of properties. This means that properties belonging to a certain category are presented as if they belong to a different category, or a property is ascribed to a notion that could not possibly have it. [44]. As a consequence, the creative use of the common topic of definition leads students to the exploitation of metaphorical thinking, to the use of metaphors and to the different cognitive approach of notions and subjects according to their life experiences. For example, the teacher may ask students to define the term *development* based on unexpected but known categories for them, such as flowers, animals, planets and so forth in order to intervene to the construction of the term and to renew its meaning. Also, students, in couples, may play the poetic surrealist game of Definitions / Questions and Answers, which seems, as the following one, to “free words and images from the constraints of rational and discursive order” [45]:

-What is physical love?

- Half of pleasure.

Next, we will examine the common topics of *relationships*. In the argumentation theory, the sub-topic of *cause and effect* is considered as the most common and important for the construction of valid arguments. All the same, this rational relation seems to be broken by the surrealist games [46] concerning the logical rules that dominate the existing space-time. However, imaginative causes still rationalize certain results that respond to serious even philosophical questions of life. What has changed is the rhetorical situation and its rhetorical reason as described above in the paper. For example:

-Why go on living?

- Because at prison gates only the keys sing.

Once again, the logical relationship of cause and effect seems to be broken by Rodari. For example, in *Telephone Tales* and, in particular, in the tale *A Series of Questions* [47] the narrator informs us that:

This man [...] had never been able to learn how to ask the right questions, because he used to wear his socks inside out.

Through the prism of formal logic, we are faced with an evasion fallacy. More precisely, we recognize the *non sequitur* fallacy. Such fallacious statements make a mental leap, since the conclusion does not follow from its premises. However, in the context of a narration the conclusion does follow the rules of an accepted imaginative logic, which engenders unpredictable situations and contributes to the production of humor.

Thus, unexpected causes may provoke magical effects and, consequently, magical thinking based on the logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. In this fallacy because two events occur in succession the former event is considered as the cause of the latter event. In this way, the writer has the possibility to accent a particular event which may form the narrative frame of a short tale for children.

The cat drank its milk and started to cackle.

In other cases, the logical relation of cause and effect is still valid. In the following example the existence of the rational relation of cause and effect enhances the coherence of information provided into a descriptive text. Let's examine the above extract taken from the story *Misery* which is written by Anton Chekhov (<http://www.eldritchpress.org/ac/jr/045.htm>) :

*The twilight of evening. **Big flakes of wet snow (cause)** are whirling lazily about the street lamps, which have just been lighted, and lying **in a thin soft layer on roofs, horses' backs, shoulders, caps (effect)**. Iona Potapov, the sledge-driver, is **all white like a ghost (effect)**.*

The sub-topic of *antecedent and consequent* is part of the common topic of relationship. The above sub-topic is widely spread and used in our daily life. Within classical logic, we face with an hypothetical syllogism, which is a [valid argument form](#). Here, the first premise or the antecedent presents an uncertain condition ('if A, then B'). If the first premise is true, then the second premise is also true or, in other words, the antecedent proves the consequent. For example: *If a person is citizen at birth, then this person has the right to vote*. The affirmation of the truth of the first premise or antecedent proves the consequent and warrants the validity of the syllogism. In creative writing the transportation of writers and readers to a magical space-time or to a completely different rhetorical situation may widely open the door to the imaginative invention and may validate syllogisms which have no sense in real life. Once again, the surrealist games indicate the path of the creative transition:

If Mercury ran till was out of breath, then believe me, there 'd be trouble.

Such games of the 'if...then...' form in classroom may cultivate the flexibility and the originality of students creative thinking and writing provoking at the same time a very pleasant atmosphere.

Furthermore, the same sub-topic may give rise to the creative written production of prose poems such as the famous poem *If*, written in 1895 by [Rudyard Kipling](#). The pre-mentioned

poem is wholly based on the use of the sub-topic of antecedent and consequent through the continuous repetition of various conditional antecedents which come to the same conclusion, to the same consequent:

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
[then] Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

(Source: *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*, 1993. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/46473>)

In creative writing, by providing students with the final conclusion / consequent of a syllogism-poem, we intend the resolution of a creative, poetic problem. We motivate students to explore the land of imagination in order to discover the magical premises which will conduce them to the truth of the poetic conclusion / consequent. So, through the knowledge and use of common topics poetic thinking and writing are developed. Such activities in classroom remind us that, in antiquity, the poetic production is considered as an act of 'mimesis' (in Greek: *μίμησις*) influenced by the production of arguments and that, since then, "poetic and argument are interdependent forms of discourse" [48].

Another sub-topic that may be considered under the general head of relationship common topic is that of *contraries*. The opposite examination of persons, notions, situations, qualities etc. may consist of a direct attack on the common sense, of a frontal assault on the usual and the trivial due to the shifting perspective strategy which is triggered by the sub-topic of contraries. For example, the use of the sub-topic of contraries may be the stimulus for creative writing of anti-tales. The creation of anti-tales not only reflects the modern "pervasive 'anti-ness' philosophy" [49] of Georges Bataille and Marcel Duchamp but, also, can become a creative and critical tool in the teaching of creative writing. For example:

Once upon a time there was a very kind and generous wolf. This sympathetic wolf was living happy with his family in the forest. Time passed. One day, he met in the forest a little girl. This girl wasn't just a little monkey as the other girls of her age. She was really naughty and insidious ...

or

Once upon a time there was an ant. A huge ant. It lived in an anthill that no longer exists. This ant was so big but so faible! It could support not even once its body weight, it could carry not even a tiny wheat grain...

Furthermore, the use of the sub-topic of contraries may conduce to the written production of contradictory proverbs with opposite meanings. For example:

It's better late than never! Vs. it's better early than never!

Thus, the exploitation of the sub-topic of contraries may facilitate students to continue the writing of known poems by adding their personal verses, which express the opposite meaning of the previous one. For example, by providing students with the first two verses of the poem *The Snow*, written by the Greek poet Kostas Kariotakis, they may complete the poetic creation by expressing opposite ideas and by visualizing opposite mental images.

*I feel so content when I see
the widespread bloom of the snow.
(Kostas Kariotakis)*

*But because of the cold atmosphere
we feel the absolute darkness!!!
(the students)*

The common topic of *comparison* may lead us to the discovery of similarities (sub-topic of similarity) among various comparable ideas, persons and situations existing in the same order of being. When the discovery of similarities concerns ideas, persons and situations existing in different orders of being, then we face with the sub-topic of *analogy*. The discovery of creative analogies among unexpected elements is very important, since it enhances students' analogical thinking and releases their metaphorical and creative skills. First, students may be familiarized to symbolic analogies through the interpretive analysis of various texts of literature. For example, the verse of the *Axion Esti* written by the Nobel Greek poet Odysseus Elytis:

For the sun to return much work is wanted.

Students may invent and write proverbs of analogous meaning by responding to the question: "What is this which looks as something else?" For example, the students may be provided with the initial proverb above:

The illiterate person is like an uncarved piece of wood. (Greek proverb)

Respectively, students may produce the following proverbs:

*The illiterate man is like an arid field.
or
The illiterate man is like the sky without stars.*

Furthermore, the students, based on the sub-topic of analogy, may enrich an existing poem by adding new verses and / or strophes in it either in groups or individually imitating the sub-topic of analogy and inventing new analogies. Let's take as example of the poem *The Field of Words*, written by the Greek poet Nikiforos Vrettakos. The poem starts with an analogy between the bee and the poet, between the flower and the word.

*As the bee turns around a wild
flower, so do I. I constantly
turn around the word.*

Here may be some of the students' attempts:

*As the sun paints red
the poppy, so do I. I paint
red words over the white pages.*

*As the soil sucks greedily
the rain water, so do I. I drink
the dew of my thought in the calyx-wine glass of words.*

Finally, in argumentation theory the common topic of *testimony* consists of a form of evidence which derives its material from external sources. In particular the sub-topic of *testimonial* exerts persuasive force, mainly, due to its "ethical appeal" [50]. However, in the context of an infantile narrative discourse the testimonial can be remarkably persuasive, if it is given by inanimate objects such as the toys in the kid's room. The animation of the toys renders the narration more interesting, because of the objects' testimonials and argumentations regarding the difficulties that may affront their life sharing with a three-year-old child! When the sub-topic of testimonial takes an unexpected form or it is droven from unexpected sources, then the perspective of thinking and writing changes completely and, consequently, leads students to the enhancement of their imagination and creativity.

I will agree totally with you, my friends, lego. The situation couldn' t be worst. I am just a little teddy bear. For how long will I bear Nikolas? For how long will he trample on me, while he is walking? Last month he unraveled my arm. Remember the stitches I had!!! Thanks God, his mother stitched me up properly. What about my sleep? Nikolas, always, drops me down to the floor. The situation has become unbearable. I assert that our life next to this three year-old little monkey has become really dangerous!!!

To our opinion, the familiarization of students to such linguistic games with common topics as well as their active involvement with them in classroom during the language arts lesson may provide them with the desirable impetus and the necessary material for their written creations. Furthermore, such linguistic games with common topics may facilitate students to develop and exercise the full potential of their latent strengths in creative writing in a pleasant and active way.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was two-fold: first, to boost the knowledge on the system of rhetorical topics and, secondly, to propose their use as an instructional tool in the language arts lesson, especially in the teaching of creative writing. In other words, rhetorical topics and, in particular, common topics were connected to creativity, imagination and to the development of students creative writing. According to Vygotsky, children may create and realize their fantasies, only if they have the opportunity to accumulate materials and experiences [51]. Conclusively, in this

paper rhetorical topics have been examined both as essential theoretical equipment and as stimulus for practical exercise to teachers and students who, within the context of language arts lessons, are interested in using, combining, changing or breaking existing methods, techniques and rules for thinking in order to produce new structures of learning.

Undoubtedly, the contribution of common topics to the development of students creative writing is not exhausted through the presentation of few examples. A more detailed approach of them may engender an infinite number of examples which prove their creative function. The use of common topics may, additionally, provide fantasy, divergent thinking and lateral thinking with a boundless space for action. However, through the pre-mentioned examples we support that common topics may still serve as an instructional stimulus which awakes in the students their existing creative forces and helps them develop and direct this development in a new path. Conclusively, the use of common topics in language arts lessons may facilitate the demanding process of creative thinking and writing for teachers as well as for students. For teachers, the knowledge of common topics adds value to their teaching strategies and may help them to teach better their students the “nature of mechanism underlying the creative work” as Leo Tolstoy suggests [52]. Additionally, it may convert students’ perception of writing as an abstract and arbitrary process in which they don’t really desire to get involved in to an explicit, personal commitment to their own powers as young authors.

The transition of students to creative authors needs time to occur. Common topics, as a recourse to the students’ existing knowledge and experiences may, first, conduce them to the “rule-governed creativity” [53] by assuring the logical coherence of their ideas and by facilitating the imitation of patterns of linguistic expression. Also, the students’ familiarization with common topics may progressively activate their conscious “rule-changing” or even “rule-violating” creativity [54] which allows the reasonable abuse of common logic to be expressed by preserving, at the same time, the intrinsic, imaginative logic of the new linguistic creations.

To conclude, topics or *topoi* consist the educational place from which teachers may positively explore their teaching and learning process. Neither the building of an argument nor the written creation of an artwork may succeed, if not by drawing upon the instructional procedures and strategies which the topics of rhetoric have offered over the time.

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