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**IWAC June 2011--****Enlarging the future:  
Studying the Art of Apology in the Cross-disciplinary Writing Class.**

At the University of Southern California, we currently have a first-year composition design that pairs a 4 unit writing class with a general education Social Issues lecture class taught by faculty from other departments. Since the program began this arrangement, some of the general education classes that have been offered as paired Social Issues include Holocaust Studies, Los Angeles and the American Dream, Black Social Movements in the United States, Law and Public Policy, and Religion and Morality. {slide} The premise for this linkage is that the general education/lecture class will provide material for topics, while having the writing course taught by composition instructors in an independent class will ensure that the writing, argumentation, and critical thinking aspects of the traditional standalone composition class are fully covered. This arrangement--with some tweaking and adjustment over the last dozen years or so--has had some clear benefits. Instructors, for example, can assume that students who chose to enroll in the linked lecture class have some interest and enthusiasm for that topic. The readings for the lecture class can also provide material for more sophisticated, in-depth assignments than one-off, separated assignments in non-linked classes.

The arrangement has brought some complications for instructors, however. As with all freshman general education classes, student interest cannot always be taken for granted; students not infrequently sign up for whatever class is open, regardless of interest or lack thereof, and then become annoyed or bored when asked to write about similar topics for an entire term. Territorial misunderstandings between the two sets of instructors occasionally surface. Finally, as an instructor, I have found it a challenge to maintain a balance between rhetoric, argumentation, and composition on the one side and the lecture course material on the other.

One way to I've found to address this challenge is to build topics around questions of language or writing itself, looking for areas in which lecture material from general education intersects with issues of language and communication. In other words--when and how is rhetoric or communication itself an integral part of events in American Studies or History or Religion.

One intersecting topic for a wide range of these classes is the study of the public apology. By examining the theory and practice of the art of offering verbal atonement and then applying that understanding to a situation or event closely related to their linked class, students can make use of the material from both courses in a multi-disciplinary combination. As linguist Robin Lakoff notes, "apologies have a tendency to be ambiguous. That in itself is a good reason to study them, and a good reason why studying them well requires many disciplinary models and approaches."

There is plenty of material on the theory and practice of apology accessible to the undergraduate level. By way of connecting to our conference theme, it's worth noting that the apology is often imagined as a gateway or opening to a new future. Writing in *The Lancet* in 1999, Derek Summerfield notes that "most victims would probably say that words of apology are not the end of a process, but a first step." Apologies are often a pre-requisite to reconciliation; clearly, these words--or the lack of them--can have far-reaching consequences. Aaron Lazare, author of *On Apology* (2004) has called apology "one of the most profound forms of human interaction." In discussing President Bush's apology for the Abu Ghraib abuses, Lazare notes that "Forgiveness is often portrayed as a generous gift bestowed on us by someone we offended or as a gift we unconditionally extend to someone who offended us, regardless of an apology. Yet my own analysis has convinced me that forgiveness and apology are inextricably linked. Indeed, especially after a party has been humiliated, as in the case of Abu Ghraib, apology is a

vital, often necessary, step toward assuaging feelings of humiliation, promoting forgiveness, and restoring balance to a relationship.” Recent academic studies of the modern apology--such as Koesten and Rowland’s “Rhetoric of Atonement,” include a spate of articles on their rhetorical and linguistic properties. This current political, sociological, and academic climate provides a fruitful opening for writing on this topic.

Lazare sets up a 4-point criteria for a meaningful apology. {SLIDES} To have a chance of succeeding, an apology requires a full admission of the offense, an explanation for the action, a statement of sincere regret, and some form of reparation or sacrifice from the offending party. Koesten and Rowland’s delineation of rhetorical atonement sets out five components: full acknowledgement and request for forgiveness, evidence of inner reflection and commitment to change, action to improve the situation, some form of sacrifice, penance, or suffering, and a public forum for the whole process. Koesten and Rowland differentiate between *apologia* in the classical rhetorical sense of a defense meant to restore reputations and “atonement,” which functions as a purgative and restorative action itself. Lazare uses apology in a similar sense as Koesten and Rowland’s atonement. Both sets of criteria are useful in setting up a benchmark for students to evaluate or formulate an apology. Students can choose one of these sets of criteria as it relates to their topic, or they can justify a unique set.

Apologies are an excellent vehicle for building on student interest because they occur in emotionally charged situations in our own lives, so students have a built-in emotional connection to the topic. Everyone, at some point, has had a personal experience with an apology, or lack of an adequate one. Students can begin by writing a journal entry or brief in-class response about a time when they expected or owed an apology; judging from observation of their attention to the task, students respond emotionally and enthusiastically to this part of the assignment. To

promote engagement, I assure students that this part of the assignment won't be collected. Once they've described their personal situation, the discussion then turns to the question of what they expected this apology to accomplish, or, if the apology was completed, what it did accomplish. Students grasp the importance of words when they have to articulate--not merely why someone owed an apology, but what change or improvement an apology would accomplish. In answering this question, students make their own connections between words and action, text and response.

A sampling of real and hypothetical apologies in class discussion brings the topic beyond personal experience and into analysis. They have an instinctive sense of "bad" apologies, even if they do not immediately know why some apologies are bad. For example, students always recognize "I said I'm sorry, OK? Now let's forget about it!" as an ineffective apology. And the classic non-apology wording "If anybody was offended by what I did or said, I apologize" is so clearly inadequate that it has become a cliché. Both examples move the onus from the offender to the offended. In one, the speaker demands rather than requests a specific response. In the other, the addressee is rendered guilty of an overly sensitive response. In determining that respect for the addressee and relinquishment of power might be one requirement for a productive apology, students are moving from emotive to critical responses.

{slide--brandt} A multi-media class presentation of verbal and published apologies, followed by a combination of open and more specific discussion questions (What did you think of this apology? Why did he ----?)--sharpens students' analytical skills. Comparison of different situations brings further distinctions and a concrete understanding of kairos--appropriateness of situation and timing. When should an apology take place? Is it ever too late--or too early? Should some form of penance or reparation take place before or after the words are delivered? The assignment also stipulates that two of the most common--and least helpful--responses to the question are off limits. First--The claim that an apology is pointless because it cannot undo the

damage is self-evident, and not an argument. The assignment asks what, if anything, an apology CAN do after an offense. Second, students cannot rely solely on the incident's severity or harm to justify an apology. While the nature of the offense must be established, the apology itself must achieve something worthwhile.

Students have written on subjects ranging from Japan's comfort women of WWII to Tiger Woods' televised apology, Clinton's Tuskegee Experiment apology, Gov. Sanford's apology to his wife and his constituents, and Tony Blair's apology for The Great Famine in Ireland--delivered by proxy through actor Gabriel Byrne. The analysis of these topics demands attention both to rhetorical forms of atonement and to very specific details and nuances of particular situations. Students often use readings from the paired class, or they find suggestions for topics or research from the professor or TA. For example, students who review the calls for the Japanese government to apologize for its treatment of the Comfort Women in WWII need information on history, cultural differences, and gender studies. The specific conditions of the case inform their analysis of the rhetorical situation and the requirements for an appropriate apology. The importance of confession and admission becomes particularly acute in this case; knowing that the women involved were often dismissed as willing prostitutes explains why the survivors have refused monetary compensation that lacks a full acknowledgement of the coercion they faced. In this case, those words are more important than the monetary compensation that has been offered. We can see, then, how looking at material from a completely different perspective reinforces understanding of the topic. Students are required to scrutinize not just what happened, but what effects an incident had, and what could be done to minimize or change those effects.

Students also use the theoretical base provided by the readings to examine cultural implications. For example, papers on the Hainan Island incident, in which the U.S. issued a very carefully nuanced apology after a spy plane was caught in China's airspace, explored how cultural and diplomatic expectations intermeshed with international politics to produce a uniquely crafted apology. The resulting apology lacked a full admission; in this case, the specific rhetorical situation required a very carefully crafted level of ambiguity that left room for each side to present an acceptable interpretation to its own populace. (Chinese translation?)

On the other hand, the subject opens the possibility that not all demands for apology fit with the Lazare's or Summerfield's concept of a profound, redemptive event. Understanding the power of rhetoric also implies understanding its limitations and misuse. Students are quick to bring up situations in which a call for apology resembles a hostile, antagonistic stance, where an apology, if proffered, is seen as a sign of political defeat rather than a new beginning. Recent, often politically overdetermined demands for apology for minor gaffes provide material for study. Students examine the differences between the apology and restitution called for in these cases and in more serious events.

I've found this topic a promising approach to teaching cross-curricular writing and critical reasoning. It requires research across the fields of rhetoric, linguistics, and the topic area. It also requires students to delve beneath the surface of topics, beyond obvious or easy responses, and to consider multiple viewpoints and possibilities and make a final evaluation. I look forward to working with this material in future cultural and political environments, and to incorporating suggestions and ideas from others with similar approaches.