Grant Boswell’s “The Disfunction of Rhetoric: Intervention, Imaginative Excess, and the Origin of the Modes of Discourse” provide a historical framework and reference for the changes in rhetorical theories. Beginning with Campbell’s definition of rhetoric as evidence of the link between rhetorical functions and “specific mental faculties” (237). However, it is Alexander Bain that Boswell credits as the person responsible for bringing together rhetorical theory and faculty psychology, which he defines as a “response to an episode in English history” that accounted for the perceived need to control or restrain by way of reason and rationale the imagination that was believed to have brought about a “psychological imbalance” (248). Due to Civil War and the belief that the imagination, which at the time was viewed negatively due to the fact that it was seen as uncontrollable there are several changes in rhetorical theory and curriculum.

Imagination, according to several scholars needed reason, or else people would use its power without proper training or understanding. Imagination either caused excitement, or was brought about by excitement, or some other emotion that led to “uncontrolled poetry” that must be “restrained in some way by another mental quality” (247). This distrust of the imagination acting on its own, without any restraint or control by reason, logic, and rhetoric led to changes in curriculum that respond to the need to separate the imagination necessary for poetry, but otherwise untrustworthy in composition.

It is here, if I understand it correctly, that the separation of poetry and rhetoric occurs. Locke does not object to rhetoric, but to the use of imagination in rhetoric. He viewed imagination as the “wit and fancy that, by pleasure and delight, distort understanding” (245). Distorting understanding distracts from a pursuit of the truth. Fulfilling a desire or pleasure of the imagination is the cause for this distraction. Essentially, the imagination is far too free and wild to be trusted on its own. Giving in to its whims keeps other mental uses away from pursuing truth. This leads to a need for a mental balance that ultimately accounts for the modes of discourse that were designed to act as the controlling agents of rhetorical practice.

In “The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse” Robert J. Connors traces the popular modes of discourse, narration, description, exposition, and argument what he views as shifts that led to their downfall. The modes were popular classification schemes, but ultimately did not teach students how to write. This glaring weakness is the result of the fact that often times the modes “classify and emphasize the product of writing, having almost nothing to do with the purpose for which the writer sat down” (454). Replacing the modes is an attempt at prioritizing process.

The significance of these two articles is to achieve a greater understanding of, at the very least two shifts in rhetoric, and as a result curriculum in composition and rhetoric. First we must gain a deeper understanding what caused the shift away from imagination as means to invention/ideas due to the need to restrain and control its role in rhetoric. Second, it is important to understand how that shift led to the modes of discourse, a system of classification that ultimately did little to teach writing. These two shifts in rhetorical theory are linked and respond to other factors in society, history, and education at the time.