

**Sabbatical Report**  
**Wendy Commons**  
**Fall 2018**

**Acknowledgments:**

My sincerest thanks to Collin College, President Neil Matkin, the Board of Trustees, Dean Brenda Carter, Associate Dean Amy Gainer, and the members of the Sabbatical Committee for allowing me this opportunity to complete my dissertation and earn my PhD during the Fall of 2018. I believe this experience has rekindled my enthusiasm for research and writing, which will no doubt be reflected in my teaching.

**Sabbatical Summary:**

The purpose of this project (aside from completing my PhD in Rhetoric) was to consider how the use of a stage persona might affect a musician's audience. I wrote my prospectus for this project in the Spring of 2011, my first semester teaching full time at Collin. I had worked on my dissertation here and there since then, but unfortunately a series of personal setbacks and the intense pace of teaching five sections of Composition every semester prevented me from dedicating as much time to it as I would have liked. Needless to say, I was thrilled to finally have a chance to focus all of my energy on this project.

Persona is a concept that is key to understanding rhetoric, yet there has been very little research exploring persona in the past several decades, and what little exists is more focused on literary criticism and creative writing. However, in today's world an understanding of persona is perhaps more necessary than ever as we balance the ever-expanding number of roles we take on in our lives.

As a lifelong music enthusiast, I've always been fascinated by the idea of stage persona, so I decided to use that as a lens to examine the idea of persona and how it might affect an audience. I focused mostly on David Bowie, who adapted several personas throughout a career spanning over fifty years; I concentrated on the Ziggy Stardust persona Bowie used to catapult himself to stardom in the early 1970s. Using rhetorician Kenneth Burke's dramatisic pentad (act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose), I examined means (agency) by which Bowie (agent) brought to life the Ziggy Stardust persona (act), as well as the musical, artistic, and political environment (scene) that inspired him to do so (purpose). Burke's concept of identification served to offer

insight into Bowie's relationship with his audience at this time and how his use of Ziggy affected this relationship.

While musicians in the 1950s and 1960s were expected to maintain a consistent persona that was in keeping with who they were offstage (or who their audience believed them to be offstage), glam rock in general, and Bowie in particular, helped shift those attitudes by embracing theatricality and artifice, and audiences responded well to this less serious attitude. In Bowie's case, audiences did not seem to mind the "fakery" of his Ziggy persona because, in addition to being somewhat novel and giving Bowie an aura of enigma, it functioned as a metaphor for their own sense of alienation and frustration, enhancing their connection to Bowie and his music.

While all of this may seem to have nothing to do with teaching, one of my findings (and an opportunity for future research) is that there is little distinction in the field of rhetoric between persona, ethos, and identity. Bowie's work shows us that this distinction is more significant than previously thought: he employed various personas throughout his career that varied in degrees of fiction and reality, but he managed to maintain a fairly consistent sense of identity over the course of fifty years and more than two dozen albums by returning to similar themes and cultivating a uniquely performative voice and singing style; the combination of this identity and his personas is what created his ethos, his sense of credibility to his audience.

In my research on this topic, I was surprised to find very little connecting the concept of persona to composition pedagogy. In addition to considering how instructors might use persona to better engage their students, teaching students how to develop personas would have far-reaching ramifications. Introducing students to academic writing and asking them to create their own scholarly persona, considering what that persona's key characteristics might be and how they differ from the student's, would help them better understand the expectations that come with college-level writing. Since most composition instructors discuss rhetorical context, discussing persona more explicitly would enhance current practices by offering students another way to consider appropriateness and decorum.

Students could also consider persona in terms of curating content for social media, perhaps examining different types of user profiles and determining what makes them effective or ineffective. They could also use this information to cultivate a more professionally appropriate social media presence that would help prepare them to enter the job market.

As someone whose entire oeuvre seems to emphasize the value of embracing one's weirdness and questioning the reigning symbols of authority, Bowie created a body of work largely focused on the notion that we do have a choice in who we are and that personas are a key means by which to exercise it. Bowie openly expressed his own eccentric identity through his various personae and in doing so encouraged others to, as Oliver James would put it, "up their Ziggy": to consider who they wanted to be and take steps toward that goal. By examining the Ziggy Stardust persona through the framework of Burke's dramatism and identification, I hope to have provided an opportunity for others to explore the concepts of identity and persona in new and interesting ways.

I've included the sources I used in writing my dissertation for your reference.

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