

**Collin County Community College District
APPLICATION FOR SABBATICAL LEAVE**

Instructions

Please complete this application by responding to all items. Attach requested documentation (in the order requested) and secure the appropriate signatures prior to submitting the application to the chair of the Sabbatical Leave Committee. **Please submit the original and 10 copies.**

Name Wendy Commons CWID 110614886

Title Professor of English Division Academic Affairs, CPC

Have you ever been granted a sabbatical? No If yes: Dates of Prior Sabbatical(s): _____

Please provide a brief description of your previous sabbatical project:

Sabbatical Leave Period Being Requested

Dates: Beginning Date August 27, 2018 Ending Date December 31, 2018

Length: One semester Two semesters Other _____

Applicant's Agreement

ABSTRACT

Please give a summary description of the project and its significance in improving teaching and learning at Collin College. Please use language that can be readily understood by persons in areas of expertise other than your own. **PLEASE DO NOT EXCEED SPACE PROVIDED BELOW.**

I would like to use this opportunity to finish my dissertation and complete my PhD in Rhetoric at Texas Woman's University. My dissertation examines how certain musicians use stage personas as rhetorical tools to help them connect with their audiences, focusing mainly on David Bowie. I will be using recorded performances, albums, published collections of photographs, interviews, and various information gathered at the David Bowie Is exhibit, which I visited in Chicago in November of 2014. While this project is already in project, I believe that taking this time to work more closely with my dissertation committee (Dr. Lou Thompson, Dr. Guy Litton, and Dr. Genevieve West) would allow me to successfully complete it within the given time frame.

The construction of persona is largely ignored in rhetoric scholarship, but it has become an increasingly important concept as mass media and social media force people to become more aware of the need to adopt appropriate personae for various situations. As a teacher of composition, I'm particularly interested in the implications this research may hold for my students, who are learning how to present themselves to the world and how to communicate effectively in the classroom and beyond. Many musicians, Bowie included, turn to personas as an opportunity to express different sides of themselves while simultaneously distancing themselves from those expressions. Ultimately, I would like to discern whether teaching composition students about persona and encouraging them to construct personas of their own would allow them to better understand how to communicate in different ways and through various media while maintaining a sense of authenticity.

Examining Stage Persona and Its Implications in the Composition Classroom

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, French economist Jacques Attali observes that “[m]usic is prophecy... It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible” (11). Rock music has always been an arena for experimentation and the unbridled expression of taboo ideas and beliefs, whether sincerely experienced or devised to create publicity. That iconic image of Elvis Presley gyrating on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956 and the controversy that followed is practically part of our cultural consciousness, as are a handful of other artists and incidents in rock that have altered the cultural landscape in some form or fashion. The “rock star” is supposed to embody the idea of youthful rebellion, make people question established mores, and present himself or herself as a force to be reckoned with. Sometimes performers find these characteristics at odds with their personalities, which is one reason why so many musicians create stage personae: to bridge the gap between who they are as individuals and who our culture wants (or needs) them to be. But the stage persona is more than a mask or character used to enhance performance; it can be used as a rhetorical tool.

The concept of persona does not have a very strong presence in rhetorical history. As Robert E. Brooke points out in the brief entry on persona in *The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, “[It] appears most often in the work of contemporary literary critics and poets” (569). Despite its absence in recent scholarship in rhetoric, persona has become an increasingly important concept as mass media and social media force people to become more aware of the need to adopt appropriate personae for various situations, and this is especially true for public figures like musicians. However, certain musicians have been playing with persona since long before the development of TMZ and Twitter.

Adopting stage personae has become a time-honored tradition in rock music, especially among performers who aim to push boundaries and force audiences to question the validity of social mores. Performers like Alice Cooper and David Bowie perfected and embellished this process, bringing their theatrical personae to life on stage and through media outlets like promotional videos. Today, this custom can be seen in performers like Marilyn Manson and Lady Gaga, though as the line between the personal and private lives of celebrities is blurred by the relentless presence of mass and social media, so too is the line between stage persona and personal identity.

Of the musicians who have adopted stage personae, the most influential is undoubtedly David Bowie. During a career spanning over five decades and numerous musical genres, Bowie continually transformed himself in an industry where fans and record companies generally expect musicians to remain stagnant in both their craft and their self-presentation. The widespread influence of his music aside, Bowie’s transformative practices and over-the-top stage performances inspired a number of musicians.

In this study, I wish to examine the reasons that some of these performers adopt stage personae, how these personae are constructed, and the rhetorical effects of these personae on audiences. Since Bowie was one of the first musicians to use a stage persona as a conscious, artistic choice, it seems natural that a study on stage personae as rhetorical tools should draw on his techniques as a frame of reference, though I will refer to other artists as needed to support and develop my claims.

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Terms and Questions

My primary theoretical basis will be Kenneth Burke's dramatism, a "technique of analysis of language and thought as basically modes of action rather than as means of conveying information" (*Language* 54). According to Burke, rhetoric is grounded in the notion of identification, the act of allying oneself with people or things that share one's activities, beliefs, and values: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying your way with his*" (*Rhetoric* 55). Burke calls this uniting of entities through shared ideas or attitudes *consubstantiality*. I believe Burke's theories redefine these performers as rhetors because identification allows for the possibility of unconscious persuasion; even though they may not be setting out to create rhetoric as Burke defines it, their acts can have rhetorical effects on their audiences. In a business in which the audience's perception of authenticity seems to lie at the heart of an artist's potential for success, the remarkable achievements of performers who adopt stage personae clearly indicate that the relationship between performer and audience is more complex than most people would assume. I plan to use this framework to address the following questions:

- What are the (rhetorical) functions and effects of stage personae as adopted by musicians?
- What strategies are used by performers who adopt stage personae to (rhetorically) construct their personae?
- How does adopting a stage persona affect an artist's perceived authenticity?
- How does adopting a stage persona affect an artist's relationship with his or her audience and how the audience perceives the artist?
- Do stage performers' adoptions of stage personae affect or contribute to their audiences' sense of community?
- What are the implications for these ideas in rhetoric and composition studies?

Methodology

I will analyze a variety of artifacts from Bowie's career, focusing on those produced around the time of the 1972 album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. During the production and promotion of this album, Bowie assumed the persona of Ziggy Stardust, a messianic figure who tries to save the world through rock and roll before ultimately being destroyed by his own stardom. Though Ziggy Stardust's existence was relatively brief, this alter-ego helped establish Bowie as a force to be reckoned with in rock music. But what were the rhetorical functions of the Ziggy Stardust persona?

The constituents of Burke's dramatism (act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose) will be used to examine the 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). Identification, the guiding force behind Burke's dramatism, will offer insight into Bowie's relationship with his audience at this time and how his use of the Ziggy Stardust persona affected this relationship. A clearer understanding of how persona can affect a rhetor's relationship to his or her audience can then, in turn, be brought into the composition classroom to demonstrate for students how these concepts can be applied to various rhetorical situations, both inside and outside the classroom.

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