

Overview:

Hello everyone and thank you for coming out today to listen to our panel's presentation of Complex Commonplaces and Bodily Composition. My name is Spencer Bennington and my presentation today is called "Kicking in Carnal Commonplaces: Embodied Topoi in Tae Kwon Do practice." I'm very sorry that I could not be here physically with you today, but I do hope that you enjoy this video synopsis of research that will appear in my dissertation. For more scholarship connecting writing pedagogy and martial arts or if you'd like to contact me after the presentation with questions, please visit [rhetoricalroundhouse.com](http://rhetoricalroundhouse.com).

My main focus today is to advance the theory of "embodied topoi" a term I coined when discussing the process by which Tae kwon Do practitioners incorporate cultural arguments into a material, carnal, or performed identity, one which engages in a recursive relationship between the individual, group, and/or community. In order to fully understand this idea and its significance to writing instruction, however, it's important first to understand a few key terms--chief among them is Aristotle's use of the word *topoi*, one of the ideas that themes this entire conference. Before we get to that one though, let's tackle some of the less convoluted concepts.

First, let's start with taekwondo. Tae Kwon Do is a Korean martial art first named in 1955. Technically speaking, its origins lie in Shotokan Karate, a Japanese martial art. But, because of various ethnic and political tensions, much boundary work has been done in the past seventy years to distinguish Taekwondo as something unique. This is evident now more than ever when watching many of the high-flying acrobatic kicks Taekwondo masters continue to develop and perfect. Despite it developing its own unique identity, however, Tae Kwon do is still a martial art and, like all martial arts, it operates as a rhetorical institution. This means that on some basic level, authorized Tae Kwon Do organizations are motivated to produce particular kinds of rhetorical citizens through disciplining and training. One of the fundamental and most important ways

organizations like the World Taekwondo Federation (WT) accomplish this goal is through the regulation of *pumsae* practice as an assessment measure for what defines a black belt. *Pumsae*, or forms practice, is just one of the many shared activities that unites multiple schools of Tae Kwon Do practitioners. Unlike sparring, a more sport-oriented component of Taekwondo popularized by its appearance in the 2000 Olympics, or even breaking, a test of strength, speed, agility, and accuracy, *pumsae* requires nothing from the practitioner but adequate space and focus. That's because *pumsae* practice is simply a choreographed set of blocks, strikes, and stances taught as markers of a student's progression toward black belt. Specifically, the set of eight *taegeuk pumsae* are the one common curricular component among all black belts recognized by the *Kukkiwon* (the headquarters for the WT). But why is *pumsae* the one aspect of Taekwondo designated as the one common marker for student success? In part, it's because each form is not only a set a of physical techniques, but an embodiment of one of eight specific commonplace principles to be incorporated into a practitioner's identity, principles that, when adopted, produce a body that accurately reflects the institutional goals and cultural beliefs of Taekwondo. I think of the concepts embedded in *pumsae* as a kind of *topoi*, starting points for argument. But to fully understand all the trickiness of what it could mean to call these eight concepts "Daoist *topoi*" it's worth looking at the ways the term has been understood, appropriated, debated, and (re)invented over the years.

Aristotle described the concept at length, but failed to actually provide a clear definition of what exactly constitutes a *topos*, a fact that is particularly troubling given that the word can translate to mean "topic," "theme," or "commonplace." Thomas Conley states that there "is a good deal of scholarly disagreement about just what a *topos* is and how it functions" (1994, 15). Nevertheless, the terms *topos* and *topoi* continue to be employed and debated in a variety of academic arenas.

What we can infer from Aristotle is that *topoi* are fundamental ways of forming logical inquiry, questions that can aid in the construction of a dialectic, or a type of

reasoning “from opinions that are generally accepted” (Aristotle, *Topics*, 1.1). This notion of public opinion or commonly held cultural belief, a concept Aristotle would name *endoxa*, is an important component for the understanding of *topoi* and how they function. In contrast to Plato and his belief that *doxa* (individual opinion) was the starting point for Truth, Aristotle saw the social connections between people’s commonly held beliefs as more important places to leverage arguments (Hoffe and Salazar 2003, p, 35-42). In other words, the points upon which members of a community agree and disagree are more fundamentally responsible for constituting a social “truth” than any one idea held by an individual, no matter how virtuous, scientifically sound, or reasonable. This aligns with White’s notion of rhetoric as “constitutive,” a force which facilitates argument by allowing participants to see the ways in which they’re dis/connected from one another (Sloane 2001, 616). Therefore, Aristotle’s 28 lines of argument, his original list of *topoi*, function as “headings” which group together enthymemes shared by communities and are, according to D’Angelo’s (2017) reading “the ‘elements’ out of which enthymemes are constructed” (202). *Topoi* can produce salient arguments because they operate as a base upon which a cultural superstructure of belief can take shape.

Other scholars similarly highlight the importance of *endoxa* when considering the role of *topoi* as Aristotle conceived them. Perhaps one of the cleanest definitions of this kind comes from Donovan Ochs who describes the formal topics simply as “relationships” (1969). Considering the example of Aristotle’s formal topic of “opposites,” Ochs describes how the *topos* functions not only to form a line of reasoning, but to establish a connective tissue between *endoxa* and argument.

Premise one:	Temperance	is	good
Premise two:	Intemperance	is	bad
Premise three:	[If] war	is	cause of present evils
Premise two:	[then] peace	is	remedy

Figure 5: Ochs’ illustration of Aristotle’s “opposites” *topos*.

The above example works to create an argument by providing the opposite of each claim's component parts and applying that scheme to a new topic. More importantly, however, each premise reveals a culturally accepted truth or an enthymeme as unstated, agreed upon premise (temperance being aligned with goodness). Cicero's *Topica*, a later interpretation of Aristotle's *Topics*, offers a similar focus on the *topos* as a type of "container" one which collects a "reasoning process" or "a topical relationship" (Ochs 1982 p. 106-7). In this way, again, a *topos* demarcates what is shared between members of a particular community in terms of belief and, therefore, argument. According to D'Angelo (2017), Boethius is one of the first to state this idea explicitly in *Differentiis Topicis* by relating these "lines of reasoning" to maximal propositions (202). In philosophy, a "proposition" is any statement regarding truth or falsity. A "maximal" proposition, then, is one such statement of the utmost truth or falsity. Figure 6 offers an example of such maximal propositions that had, before this time, merely operated implicitly as the driving force of Aristotle's 28 and Cicero's 18 *topoi*.

1. Question:	Is justice advantageous?
2. Syllogism:	All virtues are advantageous. Justice is a virtue. Therefore, justice is advantageous.
3. Maximal Proposition	What's true of the genus is true of the species (Boethius 51).

Figure 6: Boethius explicitly states a maximal proposition guiding a line of argument

In the above progression, Boethius demonstrates how one might ask a question in such a way as to engage with the cultural beliefs about a *topos*, in this case "justice." He then provides a logical syllogism fueled by cultural beliefs (not all societies would agree that justice is a virtue for example) which leads to a general statement of belief, his maximal proposition. While it's hard to disagree with the proposition that the "species" will contain similar traits to the genus, it's important to note that this proposition was derived from more highly debatable premises and evidence. What this means is that if different cultures employ different *topoi*, or have different values regarding similar *topoi* (like

justice) then other maximal propositions, other highly regarded truth statements, are likely to appear. Take, for example, the kind of Eastern koans or other cryptic statements that encourage meditation, even the ones featured in popular media like the 1970's hit television series *Kung Fu*. In the pilot episode, Caine (David Carradine) asks his Master Kan (Philip Ahn) about whether or not he should ever "seek victory in contention." By Western standards, victory could very well be seen as virtuous in the way Boethius describes justice. Therefore, it wouldn't be hard to imagine a syllogism suggesting that victory is advantageous no matter the route. But Master Kan does not answer from this cultural perspective. Instead he replies "We know that where there is no contention, there is neither defeat nor victory. The supple willow does not contend against the storm, yet it survives" (Kung Fu). Master Kan's answer illustrates a different *topos*, that of "survival" in place of victory. It's not hard to see that his cultural beliefs align victory and contention with excessive force, ill-intentions, and certainly not virtue whereas survival through harmonious balance is something laudable. This example merely serves to show how cultural beliefs or *endoxa* shape not only the way people think about *topoi* but dictate the *topoi* that they commonly select in making arguments. Similarly, if these *topoi* change, the kinds of propositions or truth statements derived from them will change dramatically as well.

While the concept of *topoi* is stable after the Classical period, the theory surrounding it changed dramatically in the 20th and 21st century. Miller (2008), for instance, questions the role of *topoi* in rhetorical invention, something my analysis also considers when discussing the *taegeuk pumsae* as starting points for active meditation. She claims that *topoi* "aid in pattern recognition" and, according to Olson (2010), help "ground visions for the future on images of the past" (303). This indicates that *topoi* work to provide a kind of argumentative foundation for rhetoricians and, in my own study, martial artists, who seek new knowledge by first exploring well-trodden paths, exemplifying what Miller refers to as the "generative power of the familiar" (2008, 134). Tae Kwon Do forms ask practitioners to generate these new ideas from the physical familiar, the ritual performance. In this sense, *pumsae* can be understood more in terms

of Cintron's *topoi* as "storehouses of social energy" (2010). This phrase connects back, to Aristotle's definition of *energia* as lively, physical force, a concept that Cintron argues is necessary in understanding the ability of *topoi* to "actualize" things or make them "appear to be engaged in activity" (101). If this is the case, then *topois* work not only to establish relationships (as Aristotle and Cicero demonstrated), to make explicitly visible maximal propositions or cultural enthymemes (as Boethius showed), or even to offer new ways of generating ideas and arguments (like Miller contests), but to offer a palpable, living, moving, dynamic proof that cultural arguments and their underlying premises constitute embodied realities and material consequences.

*Topoi* have been previously identified as can be "embodiable" in other, perhaps more temporary ways as Olson (2010) describes in a study of "Strategic Indigeneity" in Ecuadorian politics. For Olson, a *topos* can be embodied when a speaker or writer claims to be a corporeal representation of the underlying cultural argument (in this case, writers identifying as indigenous Ecuadorians) for the purpose of adding rhetorical force to an argument and, quite literally, giving life to dialectic in terms of Cintron's reading of *energia*. Olson's study examines ways in which writers can perform an identity through text, but, in this case, the identity in question also happened to be an important commonplace argument: who counts as a native and what should become of them? Of course, writing from the perspective of an indigenous person and giving a life, a sense of energy, and a body to such a *topos* provides the speaker with credibility, but this identity performance represents more than just an effective appeal. Olson describes such performances in terms of Diana Taylor's definition, suggesting they serve to "transmit 'social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated ... behavior,'" (Taylor 2003, quoted in Olson 2010). This "reiterated behavior" connects Miller's (2008) belief in *topoi* as a "familiar" as well as Cintron's (2010) understanding of their "social energy" by describing the physical ways in which such performances can generate new knowledge. Understanding *topoi* as having the potential for this kind of performance leads me to share with Olson the claim "that commonplaces can be activated within bodies" (p. 303). To that I would add that, when

activated, these *topoi* no longer exclusively connect premises and enthymemes, but individuals to groups and larger communities with shared systems of belief.

My study, then, examines how an athletic institution like the World Taekwondo Federation can discipline practitioners around the world to adopt and embody similar *topoi* through *pumsae* practice. This analysis has roots in Debra Hawhee's (2004) examination of athletic bodies and Ancient Greek habit practices as reflective and generative of the Greek rhetorical tradition. After reading *Bodily Arts* I had one question: If Hawhee can make such a compelling argument about the rhetorical bodies of athletes in Ancient Greece, couldn't scholars look at other cultures with different rhetorical traditions and see how those bodies shaped and were shaped by rhetoric? This question led me to pursue the scholarship of Xing Lu (1998) and Steven Combs (2006) to better understand the Ancient Chinese rhetorical traditions, specifically those rooted in Daoism. From this point it became clear that the forms I had been practicing for years were part of a much deeper cultural lineage than Taekwondo's 1955 origin story would have me believe. This is because each of the eight forms required to test for a black belt corresponded to eight core philosophical principles known as the Bagua in Chinese and *Palgwe* in Korean first described in the Ancient Chinese classic *I-Ching* nearly 3000 years ago. Not only that, but the practice of these forms was frequently described as a type of "moving meditation" one that would help the martial artist apply the principle inherent in the form to their own life and thus change the way they behave in the world. In other words, these forms themselves, housed cultural arguments, ones that were to be given liveliness through bodily performance, ones that created common ground among martial artists across time and space, and ones that were to be actualized in the changing identity of practitioners--these were embodied *topoi*.

So what do these eight embodied *topoi* look like? They take the shape of cultural virtues and encourage meditation on the kinds of behavior best exemplify such virtues. My research analyzed seven different taekwondo textbooks from 1975-2016 to better understand how these principles of *palgwe* were described, how they were connected to specific physical techniques, and how the performance of those techniques were

connected to social action. For example, form 1 embodies the *keon* principle, which is described as being represented by Heaven or light, *Keon* is the ultimate creative force and is often described as such. However, the *keon* principle is rarely connected to specific techniques and sometimes only implicitly to social action. The *Ri* principle in form 3, however, is symbolized by fire and represents spontaneity and variety. This principle is usually connected directly to the physical techniques in form 3 (as it demands multiple combination movements and changes in rhythm from practitioners), but less often connected to social action. Something like the *jìn* principle in form four, though, is almost always connected to social action as seen explicitly in the quote below: “The practice of this form should help one act calmly and bravely in the face of loud and terrifying dangers, real or imagined, knowing that they, too, shall pass.”

Form #	Principle	Symbol	<i>Topos</i>	Textual Description
1	<i>Keon</i>	Heaven and Light	Creativity	Foundational creative force
2	<i>Tae</i>	Lake or Marsh	Joyfulness	Serene and gentle state of mind, yet firm within. Not silent, but bubbling up with joy--the state from which “true virtue shines”
3	<i>Ri</i>	Fire, Sun	Spontaneity or Variety	Warmth, enthusiasm, variety, passion, hope.
4	<i>Jin</i>	Thunder	Confidence	“The practice of this form should help one act calmly and bravely in the face of loud and terrifying dangers, real or imagined, knowing that they, too, shall pass.”
5	<i>Seon</i>	Wind	Non-action, Gentility	Humility, good-natured actions. “Wind’s true nature is gentle but penetrating”
6	<i>Gam</i>	Water	Adaptability, Flexibility	Any challenge can be overcome through persistence and unwavering belief. Easy to bend, but not to break.
7	<i>Gan</i>	“Top stop” or Mountain	Commitment, patience	One should not act hastily. When moving, commit and be decisive. When resting, remain stable and unmovable.
8	<i>Gon</i>	Earth	Receptiveness, openness	Ultimate receptive force, where all creation and life is realized. All life is precious and worthy of nurturing.

Ultimately my findings showed that all manuals described these principles (most of them explicitly) and many made connections between these principles and social actions like being flexible in turbulent situations, remaining confident in the face of danger, or being receptive to new knowledge. The biggest gap that I found was in the number of manuals to describe connections between principles and specific techniques. For example, form 6 embodies water and the concept of adaptability. As such, it is the only one of the eight where the practitioner appears to move in a curved arc instead of a straight line. This is explicitly described in some textbooks and helps the reader understand that they're body is being disciplined to behave according to the virtue associated with the form.

**Table 9: Numbers of Major Rhetorical Features in All Descriptions**

<b>Rhetorical Feature</b>	Explicitly described	Implicitly Described	Not Described
Description of principle	87.5%	12.5%	0
Connection to technique	28.5%	28.5%	42.8%
Connection to social action	39%	28.5%	32%

So, why does any of this matter in the context of writing studies? Well, first, I want to demonstrate just how similar some of the outcomes for the *taegeuk pumsae* are to the “eight habits of mind” the council of writing program administrators named in 2011 as integral to college success. Some of them, like “creativity” and “engagement” share a fairly neat 1:1 relationship. Most all of them have a pretty clear counterpart. So it’s fair to conclude that the goal of teaching the eight principles embodied in the *taegeuk pumsae* is one that writing instructors may also share for their students. What I’ve learned in my research, however, is that it’s much more likely for a student to embody these principles if they understand a direct relationship between physical technique and underlying philosophy. So, for example, if writing instructors were to build in ways for students to

embody concepts “creativity,” “engagement,” and “persistence” through specific exercises, the goals of these exercises and their purpose should be made explicit to the students. Repeated low-stakes, writing prompts could work toward cultivating these habits of mind and are made more effective if they are clearly labeled. Here’s one example:

Curiosity practice: give students a subject to start with. It could be a new concept or an idea from the last class that you'd like to revisit. Students must write six questions about that concept. Each question must start with a different one of the following words: who, what, when, where, why, how.

Of course, the more interactive you can make these, the more success they will have long-term. For example, having students come up to the board and write some of their questions under corresponding who/what/when/where/how/why columns before discussing the concept as a class.

These eight principles aren’t just useful for thinking through how you might design exercises and activities for your students, they can help instructors develop better pedagogical habit practices as well. If you’d like a fully downloadable list of sample prompts for students as well as instructors, check out the corresponding blog post that goes along with this presentation at [rhetoricalroundhouse.com/4C20](https://rhetoricalroundhouse.com/4C20).

I’m happy to talk more about these ideas in the q&a or over email so please feel free to contact me. Thank you very much for your time!

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1udSnaZcJ33Z2-1XAmitTgJVSHHStqs9HJ5zOBUI-kEw/edit?usp=sharing>

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NpHuHxyRu8xNMdykwTmyZQNAENT6TT0BHEi1b5QgBQM/edit?usp=sharing>

<b>Habit of Mind</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Corresponding Eastern <i>Topos</i></b>
Curiosity	the desire to know more about the world.	<i>Ri</i> : desire for variety of experience
Openness	the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.	<i>Gon</i> : receptiveness, openness
Engagement	a sense of investment and involvement in learning	<i>Tae</i> : joyfulness and enthusiasm
Creativity	the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.	<i>Keon</i> : creative or inventive energy
Persistence	the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.	<i>Gan</i> : patient or steadfastness
Responsibility	the ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.	<i>Jin</i> : confidence in the face of danger, failure, or embarrassment
Flexibility	the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.	<i>Gam</i> : flexibility and adaptability
Metacognition	the ability to reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.	<i>Seon</i> : non-action, being mindful of the natural flow of ideas, motives, etc.



This is to say that Cintron's theory allows for a discussion of "streetness," to use my earlier example, as a *topos*, not simply in discourse, but from the embodied reality of the martial artist wearing one of Master Miller's t-shirts. The liveliness of such an argument is carried in and out of various rhetorical situations and shared with multiple audiences, highlighting explicitly by means of a text as garment what is always bubbling up under the surface. But there exist other, less overt ways of granting *topoi* more dynamic energy without the use of such a prop or wardrobe, other ways of understanding *topoi* as "*embodiable*."

My analysis of Tae Kwon Do manuals and their recurring *topoi* as associated with physical training will reveal the ways in which such material consequences might manifest in the development of one's own body as a rhetorical citizen. I'm using this term loosely here to describe rhetorical citizenship as more than just government participation, something that extends to all facets of socially-conscious community interaction. The process by which this transformation or cultivation of an individual identity occurs is the disciplining that I refer to as *embodied topoi*, the action of absorbing certain rhetorical enthymemes as a component of institutional indoctrination.

overview : present the concept of embodied topoi as understood through taekwondo

Breakdown of terms: topoi, taekwondo, pumsae

Literature review: what are topoi and how have they been (mis)understood

They have been discussed as embodyable by Olson, but I want to understand them more as embodied in the way Hawhee describes rhetoric as embodied in Ancient Greek athletic practices.

This allows us to witness how institutions can discipline practitioners toward the incorporation of specific philosophical concepts, ones that act as catalysts toward their own identity-performance in the world. For example, the World Taekwondo Federation (WT) substantiates at least 8 specific commonplace ideas through the physical practice of pumsae. My research analyzes Tae Kwon Do technical manuals to investigate how these commonplace ideas are presented, how/if they are connected to the discrete physical techniques in specific pumsae, and how these techniques and the commonplaces they embody are connected to inter/intra personal skills development and/or sociorhetorical action.

Ultimately I find that there are extreme similarities between the commonplaces embodied through tkd practice and the commonplaces associated with success in college writing. The goal for future research then is to connect these habits of mind to habits of body inside and outside the classroom.

Common places: common to a group, foreign to another. The place is defined by the social energy of the people who share it and the tensions of the outsiders who do not. A topos to some may not invoke the same liveliness of argument for those outsiders.

Mine are not topoi that provide answers but rather starting points for questions--just like consulting the I-Ching one must consult their own experience, interrogate themselves etc