

Speaking Like a Citizen: Ancient Greek Rhetorical Education and Contemporary Practices

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Research points to the emergence of a consensus among many liberal arts colleges on educating students to become, in the words of Anne Colby and her colleagues, “positive forces in the world,” and on training them to “act for the common good and [be] capable of doing so effectively” (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003, p. 7). These researchers also indicate that colleges and universities across the nation are rethinking the college experience and redirecting undergraduate education toward the goal of preparing students for civic and ethical practices in the world through experiential learning, internships and service, as well as numerous pedagogies of engagement initiatives enacted in and outside the classroom. In agreement with the overall proposition that the movement of “education for action” is on the rise, Walsh and Cuban (2009) nevertheless raise a pressing question of liberal arts education within the very title of their essay: “What’s Holding Us Back?” The main obstacles include the lack of a comprehensive perspective “on how to help students weave together disparate elements of their college careers” (p. 34, as well as the absence of a unified philosophy that bridges the gap between classroom and experiential learning. They also view the goal to “enhance the likelihood that knowledge will be retained and transferred to new situations” (p. 32 as impeded by academic-discipline-specific instruction. According to Walsh and Cuban, the typical response of faculty called upon to align their teaching with pedagogies of engagement across the curriculum is, “that’s not what I do” (p. 36).

In this essay, I address this last issue—the difficulty of blending knowledge and service, thought and action in the classroom—by looking to the discipline of rhetorical education which, as Aristotle noted 2500 years ago, has no intrinsic subject matter of its own (and as such, rhetoric transcends and accommodates a variety of disciplinary perspectives). Specifically, I explore the possibility of blending knowledge and service in two ways: first, by examining classical Greek

rhetorical education; and, second, by looking briefly at select contemporary practices in rhetorical education. In both instances, separated by time and space, throughout my inquiry I hone in on rhetorical education's past and present, shared projects of training students to "speak like citizens" in service of a collective common good.

The liberal arts movement of "education for civic action" finds its best expression in our interpellation of students as citizens in democratic states. By placing students in the position of speaking and acting like citizens, we promote a self-understanding that cuts across subjects, weaves in and outside of the classroom, and provides continuity between students' current and future selves. Yet, speaking and acting like a citizen is also what educators and students alike often take for granted. We do not teach our students explicitly what the position of citizenship entails, what it means for someone to occupy it, or what it takes to address others as fellow citizens. We simply assume, as students do, that everyone knows what being a citizen entails. We encourage students to apply their learning to real-life situations, hoping we are cultivating a habitual practice that will continue to guide them beyond their educational years. Our faith—that they will be prepared to occupy the position of a citizen down the road and make civic-minded decisions—remains just that: a gesture of faith.

By contrast to our general understanding of citizenship in contemporary, twenty-first-century higher education, rhetorical education in classical Greece was developed and disseminated on the premise it could help Athenians enhance their position as citizens and enable them to become active participants in, and reflective agents about, their roles in sustaining, improving, and even saving the polis. The paramount importance of engaging their city as citizens, participating in the assembly, and contributing to the affairs of the polis, is made evident by the words of Thucydides ascribed to the general/orator Pericles, who described the unique character of his city in this way: "We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all" (*History*, II, 43). Despite their differences in social status,¹ all citizens of the nascent democracy shared a vested interest in the welfare of the polis, which was inextricably tied to their collective contributions. It was unthinkable for an adult male to be a member of the polis if he did not involve himself in the affairs of the city, the foundation upon which democratic deliberation was built (Havelock, 1957).

Civic and Rhetorical Education in Classical Greece

One of the striking features of Greek education—from the inception of democratic self-governance² through the rise and fall of

the Athenian city-state, rendered knowable in the works of the traveling Sophists and the schools of Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle—is its predominant focus on civic-mindedness (Poulakos & Depew, 2004). Theirs was a *paideia* primarily concerned with ways of acting in the polis, not learning just for the sake of learning (Jaeger, 1971). Another significant feature of this ancient Greek cultural model is the way civic education was connected directly and unambiguously to rhetorical education (Beck, 1964; Marrou, 1956; Wilcox, 1943). The first teachers of rhetoric, the Sophists, articulated the art of speaking well in public as requisite to effective citizenship and offered instruction in rhetoric to the Athenians—in Protagoras’ famous words—in the service of “making men into good citizens” (*Protagoras*, 319a). One generation later, Plato’s rival educator, Isocrates, advanced an even stronger link between rhetorical education and civic engagement, by casting rhetoric as the most viable means for citizens to reach positions of leadership in the polis (Poulakos, 1997), and by articulating rhetoric as a field of study that drew its resources from, and was shaped by the circumstances of, the city. Isocrates puts it in the following way: “It is the affairs of the polis that should be the object of our toil, our study, and our every act” (*Antidosis*, 285). The link between civic and rhetorical education had so successfully permeated the imaginary of the Athenians that Plato devoted three dialogues to rhetoric—*Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Phaedrus*—in an all-out effort to diffuse this link, discredit rhetorical instruction, and expose rhetoric as a knack rather than a bona-fide *techné* (Barrett, 1987). Yet, Plato’s lifetime goal to educate citizens suited for his private vision of the ideal city failed to derail the Athenians’ persisting interest in rhetorical education carried on by his student, Aristotle. Going against his teacher’s fundamental assertion that rhetoric is not an art, Aristotle wrote a treatise, *The Art of Rhetoric*, in which he reformulated rhetorical education to train speakers how to discover the possible means of persuading their fellow citizens, while at the same time upholding the values that held them together as a citizen body (Farrell, 1993).

Throughout the classical period, then, rhetorical education was positioned as equipment for Athenians to realize their potential role as effective citizens, that is, to explore and actualize in language their individual and collective agency. As I inquire into the link between rhetorical education and citizenship, it is important to point out that civic education in the hands of rhetoricians looks quite different from the monolithic discourse and the stable civic norms it was erected upon in the elitist and philosophical treatments of Plato and Aristotle who, as Harvey Yunis (1996) put it, sought to “tame” democracy if they could not eliminate it. The Sophists’ relativism, their commitment to principles of public deliberation and agonistic speaking practices—along with Isocrates’ fidelity to these practices and to some principles of

relativism—articulate a space of a critique against the normative claim that civic education in classical Athens must be thought in monolithic and uncontested terms.³

The Position of the Citizen

As in our time, citizenship in democratic Athens designated a subject position, a clearly articulated way of being and acting in the world, replete with designated duties and privileges. As a newly established democracy, the Athenian city-state relied on its citizens to secure its survival, foster its self-governance, and oversee its welfare. Occupying the position of a citizen in democratic Athens meant coming forward to exercise one's duties and privileges associated with the courts and the assembly. Each year, 6,000 Athenian citizens (about one-sixth of the adult citizen population) signed up as potential jurors for the courts and received payment from the state each time they were selected to serve. A complicated selection process assured all potential jurors would serve in trials that typically consisted of 200 jurors for a private trial, 500 jurors for a public trial, and as many as 2,000 for trials involving the death penalty (Jones, 1986). In addition, jurors were appointed to a trial by being chosen on the actual day of that trial through a lottery system according to the idea that "power corrupts," and as a safeguard against the possibility they might be bought in advance by a rich defendant or litigant. Trials lasted for a day, with litigants and defendants having equal opportunity to address the jury and respond to each other's allegations; the verdict to acquit or convict the defendant was reached through secret ballot (Jones, 1986). As early as in the sixth century B.C.E., following the reforms of Solon that extended jury duty to lower classes, every citizen over the age of 30 could serve as juror in an annual process that, over the extent of only few years, had the net effect of nearly every Athenian having served as juror.

In addition to performing jury duty, citizens participated voluntarily in the assembly, which met about 30 times per year, with the specific duty to determine state policy. Meetings were held in the Pnyx, a theater-like area used exclusively for assembly sessions, and with a seating capacity of 8,000 persons. There was no assigned seating, meant to be a sign of the egalitarian nature of the assembly, with rich and poor, elites and laborers sitting side by side. Typical attendance was 6,000 and gates controlling entrance to the Pnyx facilitated the state payment of citizens in attendance. After officials announced the issue to be voted on, they opened discussion with the same question that would become a staple for democratic self-governance, "who wishes to speak?" and, following debates and deliberation among speakers, citizens cast their vote by a show of hands (Stockton, 1990). Citizens voted according to their own interests, not as members of special interest groups, and their decisions

became the decisions of the state. The scorn of elitist writers for the assembly and for a process of decision-making that placed state decisions in the hands of “mobs” suggests the make-up of the assembly at any given time was similar to the citizen body.⁴

Unlike in our time, citizenly duties in classical Athens revolved around speaking cogently and listening carefully to speakers’ words in order to reach their political assessment or judicial verdict. When the itinerant Sophists presented themselves to the Athenians as teachers of effective speaking, they linked the art of rhetoric to democratic citizenship.⁵ As reported in Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*, Protagoras’ “Great Speech” sheds light on the role of a citizen in a democratic society through a mythological account of the origins of civilized life. According to the speech, the first crucial step in the process of civilization was made possible by Prometheus, who stole fire from the Gods and bestowed humankind with fire along with the basic arts of survival. Using Prometheus’ gifts, human beings discovered the power they could command when they assembled together in numbers; they were able to protect themselves from wild animals, build shelters, and construct cities. They also used these same arts to make weapons and engage in warfare—which gradually put them on the path to self-destruction. Seeing humans headed toward extinction, Zeus felt sorry for them and decided to intervene, giving them the civic arts—including the art of political deliberation—thereby enabling them to live together not as an aggregate of individuals but as a socially coherent whole. Through this mythical account, Protagoras arrives in the present, a time when the Athenians are not merely men but citizens actively engaged in their collective welfare, and Athens is not merely a geographical space but a polis, a self-governing entity relying on “a smith’s or a cobbler’s counsel in public affairs” (*Protagoras*, 324c).

When Protagoras is asked by Socrates in Plato’s same dialogue to name his profession, he boldly asserts he “makes men good citizens.” His assertion suggests that, more than a function, citizenship in classical Athens was a practice with a qualitative dimension attainable through education; it also suggests rhetorical education was considered to be schooling *par excellence* for good citizens-to-be. Indeed the Sophists constructed the qualitative aspect of citizenship in terms not of one’s birth or social status but of the impact that one’s use of language could have on fellow citizens. Both leading Sophists, Protagoras and Gorgias, approached language as “symbolic action,” and taught their students the propensity of language to function as a form of action, influencing others and directing them to perceive and understand the world from a particular perspective (Poulakos, 1994). We know that Protagoras trained his students in *dissoi logoi* (discerning the opposing arguments in every issue), in making “the weaker argument the stronger” (making a

case for the minority view), and in *orthoepia* (the accuracy of language in capturing the reality of the situation at hand) (Sprague, 1972). We also know Gorgias trained his students in *enepeia* (eloquent speech) (North, 1952), and in *kairos* (timeliness or the opportune moment) (White, 1987); and Prodicus was famed for his insistence on *akrivologia* (the precise use of diction). Embodied in their teachings, these rhetorical precepts illustrated to students that words mattered in their role as citizens, and that one's facility with eloquent and persuasive uses of language could enable him to construct beliefs and values circulating in the polis that resonated with his fellow citizens.

Using Homeric myths as their medium, the Sophists displayed the workings of language by retelling myths that revealed twin aspects of persuasion: its power to influence beliefs and its propensity to form concerted action (Poulakos, 1994). Through a playful account of the myth of Helen of Troy, Gorgias displayed the power of persuasion in the "Encomium of Helen" to challenge even the most entrenched traditional beliefs: under the sway of Gorgias' words, Helen—whose reputation had been fixed by tradition as the person who betrayed her husband, her king, and her country—is defended as an innocent woman subjected either to the force of *bia* (rape), the charms of seductive *eros* (love), or the power of *logos* (argument) on her soul. In turn, the power of language to form consensus was demonstrated by Protagoras' account of the imaginary, flute-playing city where competent flute-players are led to excellence by master flute-players—an account that unfolds in direct analogy to deliberating, democratic Athens, where citizens competent in political deliberation could attain excellence by being trained by master rhetoricians like Protagoras himself. According to the Sophists, then, occupying the position of a citizen meant speaking in public, addressing fellow citizens eloquently and persuasively, and using language to promote ways of being and acting in the world by supporting or refuting prevalent opinions, and by refining or intervening in what others previously constructed as desirable and possible for the citizen body.

Speaking Like a Citizen

One of the constants in rhetorical education traceable from the Sophists, through Isocrates to Aristotle, is the shared understanding of rhetoric as a power (*dunamis*): a force that can bring about change (Haskins, 2013). Beyond this meaning, Aristotle also defined *dunamis* as potentiality, the capacity of a thing to be actualized, to achieve a completed state (*Metaphysics*, IX, 4, 1048a). In the context of citizenship, this meant the potential to reach a better version of oneself depends not on carrying out one's duties as citizen but on becoming a more complete agent in the political life of Athens. It is this qualitative dimension of citizenship to which rhetorical education becomes attached. One can see

how this sense of potentiality animates the account of civilized life in Protagoras' "Great Speech" as human beings realize a better version of themselves through the possession of civic arts, which transforms them from aggregates of individuals to integrated members of a broader social entity. Isocrates makes a more explicit link between rhetorical education and the potential to improve oneself when he argues that, though there is no art that "can implant sobriety and justice in depraved natures," the "study of political discourse can help more than any other thing to stimulate and form such qualities of character" (*Against the Sophists*, 21). He expands his claim in *Antidosis*, positing, "people can become better and worthier if they conceive an ambition to speak well" (275), since "the stronger a man's desire to persuade his hearers, the more zealously will he strive to be honorable and to have the esteem of his fellow-citizens" (278). Aristotle echoes a similar sentiment when he remarks on the virtuous character of the speaker being the most effective aspect of persuasion, claiming three qualities are necessary to produce conviction in deliberative rhetoric: "these qualities are good sense, virtue, and good will" (*Rhetoric*, 1378a5).

While the act of speaking like a citizen continued to be associated with the potential of individuals to improve their character, the trajectory of rhetorical tradition shifted from eloquence to deliberation as Athens lost its status as a powerful empire, following the 30 year debilitating war against Sparta. The importance the Sophists had placed on eloquent speeches lost its appeal during the fourth century B.C.E., as leaders following Pericles abused eloquence to secure their own power positions and persuade the Athenians to implement policies that turned out to be destructive (Connor, 1971). At a time when Athens was reduced to one of four equipotent city-states in Greece, Plato and Isocrates saw education as the key to the salvation of the polis from impending disaster. While Plato launched his visionary program for an ideal city in the *Republic* at the same time he undertook a scathing critique of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* as the knack for manipulating the masses—which resonated with the Athenians' experiences with power-hungry demagogues—Isocrates presented his educational program as a pragmatic alternative, a guide for citizen-speakers to become leaders, take control of the polis and safeguard its future welfare. Paradoxically, the first conflict between rhetoric and philosophy was waged over the best means for achieving the same end, and Isocrates, who named his rhetorical educational program *philosophia*, challenged Plato's theoretical understanding of philosophy with his own pragmatic view, claiming the practical outcome of ideas rather than ideas themselves ought to constitute the proper field of philosophy (Ijsseling, 1976; Jaeger, 1971).

At the height of Athenian democracy—and under the Sophists—speaking like a citizen meant entering into a dialectical relation with fellow citizens, putting ideas and values circulating in the polis under scrutiny or exaltation, undermining some beliefs and stabilizing others. It meant competing with others over who would say things most eloquently and most persuasively, who would have the greatest impact on hearers, and who would win audiences over. It also meant having the ability to understand speaking in public as an audience-oriented art, situation-specific, and time-bound—an art that required citizen-speakers to engage their fellow citizens, listen to what they said, understand their experiences and valuations, and assess their arguments. Being engaged—knowing what issues were circulating in the assembly and how people talked about them in the agora—was the only guidance a citizen speaker had in discerning when to speak and what to say. The necessity of engaging others is reflected in a fragment by another Older Sophist, Thrasy machus, who declared in his *On the Constitution* that while in the past—when officials carried out their duties diligently—silence sufficed, the people’s expressed dissatisfaction with their government at present mandates that “one really has to speak” (Sprague, 1972). The reliable guidance that engagement provides to the citizen-speaker is best captured by Thucydides—who was reportedly influenced by the Sophists (de Romilly, 1992) when he describes discussions among Athenians following the vote in the assembly to send the Athenian fleet to the island of Mytilene, kill all men, and bring back women and children as slaves. Having listened to doubts expressed as to the wisdom behind this decision, Diodotus was able to win over the majority vote in the assembly session held the very next day, in favor of killing only those responsible for organizing the rebellion against the Athenian Empire. In a poignant understatement of the great impact in which an orator’s engagement with fellow citizens may result, Thucydides concludes his chapter on the Mytilenean revolt by reporting the bare facts of the day, namely, that immediately after the second vote the Athenians dispatched their fastest ship with instructions to catch up to the Athenian fleet, reverse their orders, and spare the island of Mytilene from annihilation (*History*, III, 35–50).

The notion of speaking like a citizen promoted by the Sophists, then, must be understood in its dual relation to the democratic climate that sustained it and to Protagoras’ philosophy of relativism that underpinned it (Guthrie, 1975). According to the Sophists, the citizen-speaker was not thought of as someone who possessed an expertise in the sense that Socrates meant in the *Protagoras*—someone who would give advice to the city based on access to some knowledge that rendered everyone else’s beliefs irrelevant. Nor was the citizen-speaker expected

to rely solely on his personal opinions and untutored beliefs in the way Socrates constructed the meaning of Protagoras' famous dictum—that “man is the measure of what is that it is and what is not that it is not.” Far from being, as Socrates insisted, a doctrine of absolute relativism, the “man measure” principle called upon the Athenians to understand themselves as arbiters of the fate of the polis who, without the help of Gods or the command of tyrants, were alone in determining the best course of action for the polis—an insight Aristotle affirmed when he remarked that, in deliberation, “the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b, 8–9). What defined a citizen-speaker was not his expert knowledge but his ability to make sound judgments, to interpret human experience consistently with what can be known, and to defend his judgments and interpretations more persuasively than others (Farrar, 1988). Rhetorical education under the Sophists, then, conceived of citizen-speakers as agents of a potentially radical democracy that could possibly extend equality to all citizens, rich and poor alike. By exercising the freedom afforded them by their democratic city—to turn the wishes of the people into legislative policy—citizen-speakers ensured the social order of the polis would continue to be shaped not by some force imposed by kings, tyrants, or aristocrats from the outside, but by the collective wishes and interests of the people. Positioning the citizen-speaker as a key instrument of democracy, sophistic rhetorical education set the stage for a more complete democracy: so long as citizen-speakers continued to aspire to excellence in expressing the wishes of their fellow citizens, the social order of democratic Athens would one day be the direct outcome of the people's collective wishes.

The Sophists' optimism was cut short by the eventual transformation of a great empire, sustained by a genuinely dialectical relationship with its allies, into a brutal tyranny oppressing its allied states, which ultimately led to Athens' self-destruction (Fine, 1983). Within the new climate of a weakened city-state, rhetorical education under Isocrates cast citizen-speakers as servants of the city and linked the conception of a citizen's civic duty to the act of serving the polis (Clark, 1996). Speaking like a citizen meant taking up issues of national importance, internalizing the needs of the polis, and representing them eloquently and persuasively to other citizens. It also meant using the art of rhetoric solely for advancing the welfare of the polis. Applying one's knowledge of rhetoric to the pressing issues of the city was at the core of Isocrates' rhetorical education. He considered the development of the art of rhetoric under the Sophists to be complete—something illustrated by his repeated reference to the field of rhetoric throughout his writings as *ta tou logou* (the things about speech). What remained incomplete in the Sophists' development—and what he regarded as his contribution—

was the application of the art of rhetoric to the advancement of the welfare of the polis. As he says in the *Antidosis*, the knowledge of the art is fairly easy for a dedicated student to master; but the application of the art takes years of practice and oftentimes requires collaboration between teacher and student: “both have a part in the exercises of practical application” (187–188).

What he means by “practical application” is, first, the ability to discern which course of action might be the best available option for the city at any given moment and, second, the talent to employ one’s mastery of the art in order to persuade others to endorse and implement the course of action proposed. It is the first of the two that marked Isocrates’ contribution to the field of rhetoric and served his ambition to turn citizen-speakers into future leaders of the polis (Jaeger, 1971). Speaking like a citizen required for him, first and foremost, the ability to make wise decisions about which course of action would best improve the situation the city faced—an ability he considered attainable only through the cultivation of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). As he put it, “I hold that man to be wise who is able by his powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course and...who occupies himself with the studies from which he will most quickly gain that kind of insight (*phronesis*)” (*Antidosis*, 271). Given the merit of a proposal for the city could be determined only after the fact, speaking like a citizen-leader required one become well-versed in foreseeing the consequences of action, i.e., in making wise decisions (Poulakos, 2004). Isocrates defended his underlying philosophy about practical wisdom against Plato’s criterion of true knowledge by being up-front about the impossibility of certainty: rhetorical training can minimize but not eliminate unanticipated consequences, and even those receiving the best education can only hope to be “less often in error as to a course of action” (*Antidosis*, 292). In his words, “those who are reputed to be the wisest sometimes miss the expedient course of action, whereas now and then some chance person from the ranks of men who are deemed of no account and are regarded with contempt, hits upon the right course” (*Panathenaicus*, 248). He insisted nevertheless that making wise decisions is possible when the polis becomes the constant object of study for students.

Speaking like a citizen, then, meant engaging others in ways that would enhance one’s ability to make wise decisions for the collective good of the citizen body. Unlike the Sophists, who saw engagement as talking with and listening to fellow citizens, Isocrates fostered another form of engagement: the study of the city’s past. Learning about the difficulties the city had faced in the past, the options for action available at the time, as well as the decisions made that turned out to be harmful

or beneficial would sharpen students' faculty of discerning unforeseeable consequences of action. Engagement for Isocrates lay in the study of wise statesmen of the past—the likes of Solon, Cleisthenes, and Pericles—who had managed to turn opinion (*doxa*) into wise judgment (*phronesis*), who had become the very best to “come before [the Athenians] on the rostrum,” and who had “brought to the city most of her blessings” (*Antidosis*, 231). By engaging wise decisions made in the past, the student—Isocrates believed—would be able to select “these examples which are most illustrious and the most edifying” and, after “habituating himself to contemplate and appraise such examples, he will feel their influence not only in the preparation of a given discourse but in all the actions of his life” (*Antidosis*, 277). He assumed that, in other words, the study of wise decision-making in the past would guide students to explore possible ways of reaching similarly wise decisions within different circumstances in the present (Poulakos, 2004). Isocrates' faith in the study of wise statesmen was eventually theorized by Aristotle as a dialectic between past and present that could guide wise deliberation: the decisions of those who possessed practical wisdom (*the phronemoi*) in the past can guide the making of wise decisions at present (Nussbaum, 1986).

Under Isocrates' training, the act of speaking like a citizen in the service of the polis acquired a new form—the written speech composed for delivery. Much closer to a political writer than an orator, Isocrates practiced—and taught his students to produce—written compositions that took up issues of lasting national importance and questions of enduring public welfare—the kind of topics that do not lend themselves to a single policy-making session in the assembly. In a culture rapidly turning to writing, the conception of a citizen's civic duty was transformed by the possibility of reaching a much larger public and having a greater impact (Havelock, 1982). Taking deliberation beyond the assembly and outside the constraints of an urgent vote, Isocrates gave citizenly voices a larger stage from which they might exert influence by addressing issues affecting the larger political landscape of Athens (Poulakos, 1997). Even though the literate population was still low, the spirit of written works circulated—as most beginnings of Plato's dialogues demonstrate—by word of mouth among non-literate citizens still bound together by practices of an oral culture (Lentz, 1989). Having brought rhetoric, as developed by the Sophists, in contact with practical wisdom, and having blended *logos* with *phronesis*, Isocrates assigned to rhetoric the mission of serving the city by means of lengthy discourses that adhered to contemporary standards of eloquence, “philosophical” reflection, and persuasive arguments. Writing like a citizen meant serving the polis as a leader, and seeking to influence not only the outcome of

policy-making decisions at present but also public opinion on issues bound to remain pertinent to the city's future. The practice of addressing a given issue by linking it with the wherefrom and whereto of the city—as illustrated by Isocrates' greatest political work, the *Panegyricus*—is perhaps the earliest precedent for our own practices of addressing issues in editorials, blogs, and journal articles today, which link advocacy with concrete visions of a changed democracy in the future.

Speaking Like a Citizen Today: Rhetorical Education at The University of Iowa

In the newly developed and instituted minor in Rhetoric and Persuasion in the Rhetoric Department at The University of Iowa, we offer a number of courses designed to train students to occupy the position of citizens including, "Speaking Skills" at the introductory level and "Speak to Change the World" at the advanced level. In these and other courses, we assign as a final project presentations patterned after the format of TED Talks and in the spirit of presenting "ideas worth spreading" to greater publics. Instruction for these projects, which occurs over several weeks during the semester, includes rhetorical analysis of some actual TED Talk speeches based on such categories as the merit of the idea proposed, the values underlying it along with its implicit critique of dominant valuations, the audiences it is likely to influence/not influence, the vision of our society animating the idea presented, and the potential societal change should the presented idea "stick" and become prevalent. In effect, TED Talk speakers are viewed as citizen-speakers, and students' analysis of TED Talk speeches is framed around the effectiveness of the case made to fellow citizens.

When students select their topic for the final project, they locate editorials, blogs, speeches, and articles on their topic, and they learn to approach all of these different genres as aspects of an ongoing conversation among citizens which critiques or challenges mainstream views. They enter the conversation by means of exercises that map those positions taken and the issues addressed, as well as assess arguments on the basis of effective and eloquent language. They contribute to the conversation by crafting their own position eloquently and persuasively, following feedback from their peers, and working on exercises that challenge them to re-write existing arguments more persuasively or to craft persuasive arguments more eloquently. Once they have found their own voices by engaging the conversation others have initiated, they conduct full research on the topic with the dual purpose of strengthening their argumentative position and crafting their argument in a way that can appeal to the widest possible audience. Their finished, multimodal presentation is videotaped and submitted to a contest funded by Iowa's Rhetoric Department and judged by non-academics—

citizens in the community—who are instructed to judge the entries on the basis of no other criteria than the excellence displayed by the speaker in making his or her case before fellow citizens.



Underlying our pedagogy is our belief the practices of Greek democracy that sought to eliminate inequality in the domain of politics can still be instructive in our current efforts to eliminate inequality in all aspects of society. Our pedagogy also is underpinned by our belief that the value of a liberal arts education remains both practical and ideal—that while a liberal arts education enables students to develop skills useful to their profession, it also connects them to a higher purpose. It is this same belief that shaped the ancient Greeks’ approach to rhetorical education, an approach in which they regarded learning to speak well and serving one’s civic duties as the single gesture of the citizenly speech. Instruction in rhetoric today is uniquely positioned to take up both these goals in the classroom, for the training of students in the nuts and bolts of speech requires a context for speaking—i.e., positioning students before a particular audience and charging them with a particular purpose. The choice to approach speaking instruction within the context of public citizenship construes the relation of learning to civic responsibility in terms of a possible co-existence of the professional and vocational domains of our students’ lives. Like the Greeks, for whom it would be unthinkable to separate rhetorical education from citizenly engagement, we too can train our students that learning is equipment for living in service of a collectivity to which they belong.

Endnotes

- 1 In view of the stark social inequalities in Athenian society, the sharp divide between land/slave owning elites and laborers, and with citizenship extended to men but not to women or foreigners, the discourse on civic education in classical Athens has been the subject of much controversy. As I have noted elsewhere (Poulakos & Depew, 2004), ever since the publication of William Bennett’s (1993) best-selling *Book of Virtues* in which he promotes Aristotle as a model of virtue-centered civic education, the theme of civic education has become something of a possession of conservatives. Tied to the elitist Aristotle, “virtue talk” elicits resistance from liberals who have been arguing for a more diverse, less sexist, and less “republican” vision of democratic life. At the height of such resistance, the discourse of dead white Greek males in the radically sexist, militarist, slave-driven, and imperialistic culture of ancient Athens has come to be regarded as

irrelevant to today's society. Worse yet, the re-invocation of civic education in ancient Greece has come to be perceived as a coded attack on the values that progressives, liberals, and democratic radicals try to instill in democratic life for a long time, and which is as important as ever to defend today. This view has gradually given way to the belief it can still be productive for those who value democratic pluralism to reach back to the Greeks (or other past societies dominated by sexist, slave-owning elites—including pre-nineteenth-century U.S. society) to inquire into the ways people of the past raised and addressed similar questions about democratic equality, albeit in a more limited sense than the way we understand democracy today.

- 2 By conservative estimates, democratic Athens lasted 110 years (with nearly two years of disruption when the Thirty Tyrants seized control of Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian war). The exact year of the origin of democracy is difficult to fix since constitutional reforms leading to democracy were made gradually. Ober dates it to 462 B.C.E, when "a series of reforms crippled the direct political power of the elite...and made possible the full political participation of ordinary citizens" (pp. 77–78); he dates it in the 440s, "with the introduction of state pay for the jurors in the people's courts...that gave the masses the same sort of control over private behavior and the interpretation of law that they had over state policy" (p. 81). The end of Athenian democracy came in 338 B.C.E., when Philip defeated the Athenian forces in the battle of Chaeronia.
- 3 At the very least, the rhetoricians' conflicting discourses about civic values and their disparate ends for civic education register as a sign of the diverse stances and plural positions available to an intellectual in the fourth century B.C.E. Key to this intellectual diversity is Isocrates' dual participation in discourses that uphold both elitist and democratic values. His ongoing vacillation between a commitment to a unitary vision of the common good for the community and a commitment to principles of relativism and public deliberation—however troubling to us—manages to drive the point that the effort to inculcate civic values is not the exclusive property of Plato and Aristotle. As he revises, redirects, and recasts Sophistical rhetoric, confirming some of its principles and distancing himself from others, Isocrates casts a great deal of doubt about his rival Plato's portrayal of Sophistical discourse as a thing of the past, no longer creating any conflict for or opposition to the dominant philosophical discourse about civic education.
- 4 According to Ober (1989, pp. 132–138), there is no evidence to support the claim that most citizens attending the assembly were quite wealthy. Demographic analysis has shown that there were no more than 2,000 leisure-class Athenian citizens, which makes impossible

their numerical advantage in a typical assembly session of 6,000 citizens. Even though the state pay of three obols was not always sufficient for some poor citizens to support their family, this did not necessarily exclude them from attending the assembly where sessions lasted for half a day, which meant that poor urban residents could still earn some additional income after the assembly. The poorest of citizens, including the old and others not able to do manual labor, were attending the assembly regularly to collect money otherwise not available to them. The claim that farmers would have difficulty getting to the assembly has some merit, though farming was seasonal and several of the thirty yearly meetings of the assembly took place during non-farming season. Aristophanes (*Ecclesiazusae*, 280–281) refers to the “assembly women” (dressed up as their husbands) coming to the Pnyx from the countryside. Ober concludes that even though the very rich, due to their leisure, and the very poor, due to their need, may have been overrepresented, “no evidence suggests that the assembly was grossly unrepresentative of the social composition of the Athenian citizen body as a whole” (p. 137).

- 5 The link between rhetoric and democracy in classical Athens has been contested on the grounds that rhetorical practices did not contribute much to the improvement of democratic relations. This claim is based on our current understanding of the role of democracy to minimize if not eliminate all areas of social inequality. Yet one needs to remember that Athenian democracy was erected in opposition to oligarchy, and the challenge undertaken was not to extend the reach of democracy to the social realm but to secure democratic governance against oligarchy by maintaining political equality among all citizens. Within this context, the most important change in the shift from oligarchy to democracy was that social status—aristocratic blood and family ties of the elite class—lost its inherent power to *logos*, and speakers had to earn their prominence in the political life of the city through their ability with speaking. True, rhetoric empowered both sides, as Protagoras’ precept of *dissoi logoi* makes clear. The democratic dimension of rhetoric was that it gave *logos* to everyone, setting up no conditions as to who had the authority to speak—as the phrase announcing the opening of each assembly session, “who wishes to speak?” makes evident—as well as Protagoras’ reference to shoemakers and bricklayers giving advice to the city also indicates.

The claim it was the elites who might have most benefitted from rhetorical education—since they were the only ones who could afford to pay for the Sophists’ instruction—may have some merit, especially during the early days of the Sophists. But this claim does not take into account the dissemination of speaking skills in an oral culture or the

exposure that thousands of non-elite Athenians had to public speeches in the courts, the assembly, and the festivals. As early as in the last quarter of the fifth century B.C.E., Aristophanes ridiculed in *The Clouds* a whole class of people loitering outside the courts and trying to sell arguments to prospective litigants and defendants. Along with providing evidence that the practices of rhetoric had been reduced to ambulance-chasing tactics, Aristophanes' depiction (along with Isocrates' scorn in *Against the Sophists* for people claiming to be teachers of rhetoric) indicates that anyone with a natural knack for speaking could teach himself to become a more effective speaker. Finally, we cannot ignore the fact Plato's vicious attack against the Sophists and the art of rhetoric happened well after the Sophists had died—which is a reliable indicator that Sophistic precepts and rhetorical practices continued to spread and to empower democrats against the agenda of the elite.

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