

Position Paper
Courtney Bailey
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“But What Can I Do?”: Democratic Participation and a Liberal Arts Education

At Allegheny College, where I teach in the Communication Arts department, we have a number of courses that focus on rhetoric, public speaking, and their relationship to the liberal arts and to democratic participation. This paper focuses specifically on my experiences with our introductory rhetoric course and first-year seminar, which all students take in the fall semester of their freshman year. Given the introductory nature of both of these courses, they have particular potential to connect rhetoric and public speaking to a broader concern with civic engagement and democratic dialogue. Such courses provide an opportunity to challenge the narrow way that most of my students understand the mission and purpose of higher education (mainly as job training), as well as to encourage them to reconsider their ability to affect change in the larger society. In both courses, I stress the importance of becoming both effective producers and critical consumers of public discourse. I do not mean to belittle the importance of their eventual occupations or the need for economic survival. However, I do attempt to expand my students’ conception of what exactly they’re doing at a liberal arts college—not just collecting tools that will help them make a living, but encountering ideas, perspectives, and skills that will help them build a life. Hopefully, that life will include a commitment to bettering what Allegheny’s mission statement calls a “diverse, interconnected world.”

I begin with my experiences teaching FS 101, the first of a three-course FS sequence that all Allegheny students are expected to complete by the end of their sophomore year. Although the specific “topics” of these courses vary greatly, they are connected by an emphasis on developing writing and speaking skills. All faculty are expected to teach in the FS program,

regardless of their expertise in writing or speaking instruction. The advantage of this arrangement is that students may be exposed to fields and subjects that they otherwise would miss. For instance, this year I taught an FS 101 course on eating, food, and the body. Most of my students had their sights set, not on communication or even the humanities in general, but on biology, chemistry, and medical school. This created some tension between my critical/cultural approach to the subject and their expectations about the course (namely, that it would teach the very “scientific facts” about food and eating that it was designed to question). For me, this tension ultimately proved productive, insofar as the course introduced students to the types of thinking inspired by rhetoric and critical/cultural studies. These intellectual perspectives involve the ability to see around the bend and to understand the larger cultural, social, and political implications of taken-for-granted beliefs.

The downside to the FS sequence arises from the fact that the courses, especially FS 101, often feel over-burdened, as one tries to address the “topic,” along with writing, speaking, and general orientation issues. The sequence operates on the implicit assumption that writing and speaking are not subjects in and of themselves, but merely techniques that can be tacked on to “real” subjects. Despite the best efforts of faculty, this can give the course a rather schizophrenic feeling, as it veers among competing topics and requirements. So, while the FS sequence does help prevent public speaking from being marginalized in a few specialized courses, it also risks re-inscribing that marginalization, insofar as it treats speaking as something that one adds on to pre-existing content. The FS sequence can unwittingly reinforce the notion that form and content are separate—that one has thoughts that are “put into words,” rather than recognizing that words make thoughts possible in the first place. This, in turn, hinders students’ ability to

understand how language and other symbol systems construct our social world and how participating in public discourse thus has the potential to affect social change.

Although I conceived this FS course as a synthesis of different means of civic engagement, both by engaging in public dialogue and by critiquing it, I was frequently met with a sense of helplessness on the part of the students. One day we were discussing the conditions of slaughterhouses for both the animals and workers, and most of my students expressed dismay over the abuses that often occur in the meat packing industry. However, as unjust as they found those conditions, they also claimed that there was nothing they as individuals could do to affect change. We went on to discuss *why* they felt powerless, bringing to light a few particular reasons for their sense of having no (or perhaps severely limited) agency in regards to larger social and political problems. Although they were clearly disturbed by typical slaughterhouse practices, they saw themselves as largely disconnected from the issue, since they weren't planning to enter that industry. They also had no idea how one would even begin to go about changing something so entrenched and seemingly immutable. They agreed that awareness of the limitations of industrialized food production was important, but they stopped there, confused about what they should or could do with such awareness.

When I suggested that collective organization is often the best route to democratic change, they looked at me skeptically. They seemed unable or unwilling to step outside the perception of themselves, first and foremost, as sovereign individuals whose primary concern is securing a good (read: well-paying) job and taking care of their future families. To me, their attitude is symptomatic of a culture that has a very narrow definition of success, one which mitigates against public activism in favor of the purportedly "private" realms of paid work and family. It also speaks to the strong strain of individualism characteristic of mainstream U.S.

culture, under which it is very difficult for my students to think of themselves in collective terms. Interestingly enough, for their final presentation of the semester, one group tackled the issue of slaughterhouses and meat production, while another critiqued the tactics of food marketing. Such topics indicated at least a nascent sense of democratic engagement and commitment to dialogue about social injustices, but I still struggle with how to help that commitment flourish in students' lives.

Every semester in my introductory rhetoric course, we discuss the civic attitudes and involvement of the current generation of college students. I usually ask the class to read two pieces by Mark Edmundson, a professor at the University of Virginia who offers provocative critiques of consumer culture's incursion into higher education. Although not about public speaking per se, these pieces do address the linkage between a liberal arts education, civic engagement, and self-knowledge. A consistent theme in Edmundson's writing is the passion (or lack thereof) he sees among college students, especially towards self-discovery and engaged citizenship. In his first piece, written in 1997, he argues that students are dominated by a desire to be "cool," a notion derived largely from television.¹ This desire for "cool" robs many students of their enthusiasm for learning and for democratic participation, since the latter require a willingness to stand out rather than blend in. Edmundson's second piece, written in 2008, makes a slightly different point—instead of seeing his current students as wanting to be "cool," he argues that they want to experience everything all at once and are thus pulled in too many directions.² If television represents students' lack of passion in 1997, then the Internet represents their overabundance of passion in 2008, as it allows them to be in many different places at once

¹ See Mark Edmundson, "On the Uses of a Liberal Education as Entertainment for Bored College Students," *Harper's Magazine*, September 1997: 39-49.

² See Mark Edmundson, "Dwelling in Possibilities," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 March 2008: B7.

(and thus, Edmundson implies, nowhere at all). In both cases, Edmundson worries about the consequences of dominant media technologies for young peoples' ability to navigate a democratic society.

At Allegheny, some of Edmundson's observations do bear out. Although there is a core group of activist students at the college, the majority tend to limit their civic engagement to volunteerism (food kitchens, disabled children, adult literacy, etc.) I do not mean to belittle such forms of community involvement, since they do require students to step outside their familiar environs (what is known on campus as "the Allegheny bubble") and address very real and pressing problems. However, I am concerned that students see acts of volunteerism, no matter how needed, as sufficient in and of themselves, so that more challenging forms of civic engagement are viewed as too radical, too disruptive, too risky. Many of my students ask, why rock the boat and risk jeopardizing one's chance at a future livelihood when one can go along to get along?

Unlike Mark Edmundson, however, I don't believe this is primarily a result of students' lack of passion (or overabundance of passion with no focus), nor do I see it as arising solely from particular communication technologies. Rather, I see it as a rational, if problematic, response to a larger social/cultural system that rewards people for following the approved script and not asking too many uncomfortable questions. The common refrain of "but what can I do?" echoes in many of my classrooms when we discuss problems of inequality and social injustice. While cynics may see this question as a cop-out, my impression is that most students would like to make a difference in the larger world, but simply don't know where to start. This is where I think public speaking and rhetoric can do students a great service, as we provide them with viable avenues for public expression and critique and with robust models of ordinary people

performing democratic citizenship. For instance, my introductory rhetoric course studies a number of activist groups comprised of everyday citizens who have intervened in public discourse with their words and their bodies, such as the suffragists, the civil rights movement, environmentalists, and queer activists. These examples suggest that one does not need to be a politician or a “great speaker” to participate in the democratic process and that collective action is a viable route to change, however imperfect such change might ultimately be. These groups also expand the boundaries of what counts as public speaking, civic engagement, and participation in public discourse—these can involve not just words, but also images and bodies.

My hope is that introducing alternative forms of speaking and acting in public will mitigate students’ tendency to understand themselves as isolated individuals who, by themselves, don’t matter. I try to help students fight back against the dominant message that they are helpless in the face of forces too large and entrenched to be changed. I agree with Edmundson that a liberal arts education, including rhetoric and public speaking, should help students gain self-knowledge, but I also think it has to go farther than just the individual self. Instead, we need to help students understand themselves in relation to others, including the privileges they may enjoy, the disadvantages they may face, and the ethical responsibilities they hold as democratic citizens.