

**“Citizens Speaking: Rhetorical Education and Civic Engagement”
Denise M. Bostdorff**

**The Brigrance Colloquy on Public Speaking as a Liberal Art
Keynote Address
Wabash College
February 26, 2009**

(Some of the material in this address previously appeared in [McDorman, Todd F. and David M. Timmerman, eds. *Rhetoric and Democracy: Pedagogical and Political Practices*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008.](#))

In some ways, this does seem a bit like “old home” week. Bill Keith and I were undergraduates together, back when philosophy still held his heart. And I’ve known David Timmerman for nearly 20 years, although it’s somewhat shocking to absorb that fact. As I look around the room, I see some of you that I’ve attended many a conference with, usually on the topics of public address or presidential rhetoric. A number of you also teach at sister GLCA schools. And then there’s our location.

You see, fifteen years ago, I lived not very far from here, just off Route 231, south of Lafayette, Indiana, near McCutcheon High School. At the time, I was teaching at Purdue University, where my husband Dan worked in the School of Liberal Arts Advising Office. We had visited Crawfordsville from time to time, since it was so nearby, including attending a community unity celebration with our then 2-year-old son that had been organized to counter a Klan rally downtown. Dan had even interviewed for a visiting position in what is now the Department of Rhetoric at Wabash and, had he gotten it, we might just have stayed put a bit longer, so perhaps I should thank you for inadvertently hastening our move to Ohio.

I also have to admit that part of the reason for my switch from a research institution to a small liberal arts college was that I loved teaching undergraduates. This is *not* to say that I disliked graduate teaching because I did enjoy it, and I'm still quite close with a number of my former graduate students. However, in graduate school, professors spend most of their time helping to create other professors. This is an important task, mind you—we certainly don't want to run out of good professors—but to think that one's teaching might lead to physicians, teachers, lawyers, business people, ministers, journalists, politicians, and scientists who have rhetorical sensibilities and civic inclinations—that was something I could get excited about. And I suspect that my Brigance Colloquy participants would agree.

Today, I'd like to focus my remarks on four related topics: why public speaking is a liberal art and its fall from grace, the retreat of higher education from the public realm and the corresponding decline of civic engagement in the United States, reasons for optimism that this entire state of affairs can be turned around, and, finally, how scholar-teachers of rhetoric might seize the current moment.

As I was preparing my speech for this colloquy, I encountered a bit of serendipity. The students in our chapter of Lambda Pi Eta, the National Communication Honor Society, were in the midst of cleaning out a departmental conference room that had grown cluttered over the years. They asked me to go through a box of books that either we had duplicates of or that were available in the library. As I went through the box's offerings, a volume caught my eye: a tattered copy of Wilson and Arnold's 1964 text, *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, which begins with a quotation

from Isocrates, in which the venerable teacher of rhetoric notes that the art of discourse is what elevates humanity above other creatures. According to Isocrates, “because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of the wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish.” Wilson and Arnold used Isocrates to make the argument that public speaking is a liberal art, for “To study speech in general or public speaking in particular is to explore highly intricate processes by which man apprehends truths about himself and his environment.” Rhetoric was, for them, a means to understand the nature of humanity.

Surely, though, this is but one dimension to understanding public speaking as a liberal art, for what we cannot lose sight of is that the study of rhetoric flourished in ancient Greece at the same time that democracy—or citizen self-rule—began and that public speaking and public deliberation were an integral part of democratic practices. True, the democracy of ancient Greece was far from perfect since it excluded women, slaves, and foreign-born males. Nonetheless, as Timmerman and McDorman have observed, “the shift to democracy in classical Athens was stunning.” The relationship between democracy and rhetoric is also key to understanding public speaking as a liberal art, and we can turn, once again, to Isocrates for explanation.

Isocrates was a later Sophist in ancient Greece who ran a school that rivaled Plato’s Academy. Like Plato, Isocrates viewed misleading persuasive efforts with

concern, but he rejected Plato's condemnation of rhetoric as a discipline, for Isocrates was, first and foremost, a teacher of rhetoric who believed a rhetorical education could best ready students for citizenship. Isocrates disapproved of philosophers like Plato who retreated from society to engage in dialectic and private study. Instead, he argued, scholars should immerse themselves in the polity after completing a rhetorical education to prepare. In *Antidosis*, Isocrates complained that critics of rhetoric chose to praise "men who ignore our practical needs" and who engage in "mental juggling" and, conversely, to attack "those who pursue and practise those studies which will enable us to govern wisely both in our own households and the commonwealth." Isocrates recognized that in daily living, particularly in the realm of politics, people had to deal with probabilities because truth was rarely ascertainable. Will the economic stimulus plan work? Will our escalation in Afghanistan end well? We cannot know for sure. Through a rhetorical education, however, Isocrates argued that students would learn to reason and choose their words carefully and hence be less likely to commit an "error as to a course of action."

In the short term, public speaking's elevation as an integral part of a classical Western education held. Cicero and Quintilian carried on this tradition. Indeed, the Latin word *liber*, from which liberal derives, meant free—as opposed to slave—so a liberal arts education was one for free males who also could afford it. In medieval times, the trivium of rhetoric, grammar, and logic was considered to be the crucial foundation of a liberal arts education.

There are many reasons why rhetoric eventually fell from such a lofty societal role. To name just a few: the dwindling appeal of Isocrates' highly contextualized writings, as memories of ancient Greece faded away, in comparison to the timeless ideals postulated by Plato; the influence of Peter Ramus, who reduced rhetoric to nothing but style and delivery, while giving invention and content to logic; and the rise of elocution which taught an extremely stylized approach to recitation and oratory, with its textbooks often including helpful diagrams for how to convey: "Horror!", "Adoration," "Remorse." Moreover, English departments in this country developed a growing interest in literature and literary scholarship, as opposed to practical rhetoric and especially what they perceived to be pedestrian public speaking.

Rhetoric as a liberal art began to resurge, however, in the Progressive era, as the writings of Hogan, Keith, and Danish have been quick to show. Progressives believed citizens needed the skills that would allow them to participate in civic decision-making; they also emphasized citizen responsibilities over citizen rights, encouraging people to act not on individual interests but on the larger society's interests.

At the same time that the Progressive movement was sweeping the country, teachers of speech were breaking away from English to form their own departments and their own discipline. Just as Dewey had emphasized democracy in everyday life, so the founders of our current discipline, in Keith's words, "democratized" public speaking by emphasizing the relationship between the speaker and the audience, and by making public speaking "an outgrowth of everyday communication."

In another old text, West's *Purposive Speaking* from 1924, he tells students that they should not attempt to emulate the oratorical style of the great platform speeches like those given in the well of the Congress, for it is the speeches given elsewhere—in the committee rooms and private offices—that actually swing the votes. Speakers should know their topics exceedingly well and prepare a speech that parallels, as much as possible, an excellent conversation. For West, students needed to make the decision of whether they wanted to draw attention to themselves or to their arguments. He concluded that the individuals who would be thought of as great speakers in the future would be those who could converse well on their area of expertise, whether they were engineers, publicists, physicians, politicians, or religious leaders. In short, public speaking was no longer an ostentatious art limited only to certain venues or to certain types of people.

With World War II, teachers of speech further solidified the association between rhetoric and democracy. The frontispiece of Lyman Fort's 1944 textbook, *Speech for All*, features a print of Norman Rockwell's "Freedom of Speech" from the Four Freedoms campaign which pictured a man standing up to speak at a public meeting, with the words printed below, "Freedom of speech calls for ability to speak." Of course, one can also learn of this renewed association between democracy and public speaking by looking to one of the great luminaries of the early field of speech and a lion of the Wabash campus: W. Norwood Brigance. To give those of you who are current students some sense of the largeness of Brigance's personality, in 1956 your school newspaper described the good professor to new students with the following analogy:

“Brigance—what is to Wabash as God is to the rest of the world.” No shrinking violet, he.

In *Speech: Its Techniques and Disciplines in a Free Society*, Brigance declared, “There are two kinds of nations and two kinds of people in the world: Those who in disagreements and crises want to *shoot* it out, and those who have learned to *talk* it out. To shoot it out is the way of the concentration camp, machine gun, and the bomb. To talk it out is the way of mediation, parliamentary discussion, and political campaigns settled by the ballot.” His experiences with two world wars and his classical rhetorical roots led him to conclude that speech was essential to democracy. As Brigance warned, “A free society survives only when speech is used in the main as an instrument of *enlightenment*.” Rhetoric was, therefore, “*a dangerous form of power requiring a sense of high responsibility by those who use it,*” which made public speaking courses particularly important.

Something, however, has happened since the heyday of W. Norwood Brigance. First, at some institutions, mostly private schools, the public speaking course has gone the way of the dodo bird. The assumption seems to be that while writing is so complex and so challenging that it must be taught—indeed, special courses are required to do so—oral communication is something that one just “picks up” through observation. If this were true, of course, then every great author to lecture on college campuses would turn in a dazzling performance. That does always happen, doesn’t it? Isocrates encountered similar frustrations in ancient Greece, for he noted that critics of rhetoric tended to praise those who were eloquent as “being blessed with a noble gift” that

demanded no study; on the other hand, critics railed “at those who wish to become eloquent, on the ground that they desire an immoral and debasing education.” This contradictory thinking about public speaking is still very much alive.

In contrast to private institutions, public colleges and universities have tended to include public speaking as part of an introductory communication course or a course unto itself because they perceive communication skills to be important. However, these same institutions seem to have lost the connection that once linked public speaking with democratic practices. No where is this more evident than in how so many textbooks present public speaking as a pragmatic skill set needed for business or personal success. For example, Beebe and Beebe tell undergraduates in their *Public Speaking Handbook* that there are two reasons to study public speaking: empowerment—or getting “an edge that other, less skilled communicators lack” and employment—or gaining skills that will get one a job. Likewise, DeVito’s *The Essential Elements of Public Speaking* emphasizes that students will gain “enhanced personal and social abilities” and “improved academic and career skills.” Preparation for citizenship is nowhere to be found. In *Public Speaking in a Diverse Society*, Kearney and Plax do a laudable job of making students aware of cultural diversity and how to adapt to it in their speeches, but fail to integrate the ideas of democratic deliberation and citizenship into their discussions. Even in those texts that deal with the relationship between democracy and public speaking in their initial chapter, the concept mostly disappears in the rest of the volume, as in Lucas’s *The Art of Public Speaking*, or if the relationship of public speaking to citizenship is mentioned periodically, as in Osborn and Osborn’s

Public Speaking, it is not a major focus. We seem, in other words, largely to have lost touch with our discipline's roots.

At the same time that public speaking's status as a liberal art—one integral for successful democracy—has come into question, though, its fall from grace has been accelerated by the retreat of colleges and universities from the public realm. Schneider points out that higher education distanced itself, in part, as a way to protect funding and scholarship from politically motivated attacks in the anticommunist furor after World War II. However, Zlotkowski argues that research institutions were also interested in attracting government funds during the Cold War arms race, which led them to detach from the world of politics in order to enhance their credibility through the appearance of objectivity.

The same period saw the culmination of a conflict that first emerged in American higher education in the nineteenth century between those who adopted a traditionally American model that made clear connections between education and citizenship, and those who began to adopt a German educational model of research and expertise. According to Mathews, the triumph of expertise led to “the professionalization of disciplines within the liberal arts. A new generation of academics began talking more to each other than to their fellow citizens, who could not understand their expert language.”

In recent years, critics of and from higher education have called upon their colleagues to involve themselves once more in educating citizens. However, Zlotkowski maintains that because academics from research universities continue to

dominate the governing bodies of most national disciplinary associations, disciplines, and in turn, the institutions that house them, have been slow to answer the call. Some academics are reluctant to bolster citizenship because they remember the demands for “judgment-free patriotism” during the Vietnam War. Others, no doubt, are troubled by the fact that higher education’s attempts to encourage civic engagement in the past tended to presume a universally Western, white, male point of view. Conversely, some critics charge that if and when academics promote civic engagement today that they promote anti-American, “liberal” points of view.

Nor is higher education’s openness to preparing students for citizenship helped by the competitive economic situation. Even before the current recession had devastated endowments and state budgets, schools were vying with each other for students and with state legislatures for funding, and increasingly relying upon grants, many of which come from corporations with clear self-interests that may be at odds with the public good. Society itself has shifted the ground beneath our feet, with various parties—employers, legislators, parents, and students themselves—demanding that colleges and universities have as their paramount goal the preparation of young people for careers. If these same entities pressed higher education to prepare students for citizenship, one might rightfully argue that colleges and universities would try harder to do so. Not surprisingly, then, civic engagement is a concept that academia tends to give more lip service to than actual service.

Accompanying higher education’s retreat from the public realm has been extensive scholarship warning of a crisis in civic engagement. Perhaps the best known

of these works, Putnam's *Bowling Alone* in 2000, analyzed data about Americans' behavior and attitudes over the past quarter century to reveal that, with each new generation, community and social capital were dwindling. Americans were participating less in politics, civic and work-related organizations, and religion; interacting less with one another socially; and experiencing lower levels of social trust . . .

Scholars also argued that the crisis in civic engagement had been further exacerbated by the growth, increased commercialism, and changing coverage patterns of the media. The result, as Zarefsky noted, was that "At the very time that media and communication technology permit *greater* access to politics, we find instead *declining* rates of political participation, a declining belief in the efficacy of political action, a declining belief that it makes any difference who is elected, and a vastly diminished belief in the nobility of politics as a profession." Putnam and others also warned that the crisis in civic engagement was especially acute among young people, where rates of cynicism about politics appeared to run particularly high and political involvement appeared to be particularly low.

Other scholars like Bennett, however, countered that the nature of civic engagement is simply changing. Even Putnam found that the one exception to the generational downward spiral of civic engagement was the fact that young people had substantially increased their volunteer work and community service in the most recent decade studied. Shea and Green's 2007 work confirmed that while young people are less involved in "traditional politics" such as voting or volunteering for political

organizations, their rates of volunteering for all other types of causes and organizations actually exceeded those of older age groups.

And, of course, the 2008 presidential campaign suggests that this trend toward decreased civic engagement, even in traditional politics, may be reversing itself. According to the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network, 52% of eligible youth voters—those under the age of 30—turned out on election day, in comparison to 48% in 2004, and—one might add—2004 marked a 7% increase in the youth vote over the presidential election of 2000. Furthermore, Tufts University’s Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, or CIRCLE, reports that these voters under the age of 30 accounted for at least 60% of the overall increase in turnout last November. Young people also overwhelmingly voted for Barack Obama, and they were active participants in his grassroots campaign efforts.

Perhaps a reflection of the interest in Obama’s candidacy, the Higher Education Research Institute’s annual survey of incoming college freshmen in the fall of 2008 found that incoming first-years were “more politically engaged today than at any point during the last 40 years, with 89.5 percent reporting that they frequently or occasionally discussed politics in the last year.” Those who “frequently” discussed politics in the last year comprised 35.6% of the survey respondents, surpassing the last record level of 33.6% that came in 1968. The survey results also revealed that 39.5% of incoming first-year students stated that keeping up to date with political affairs is an “essential” or “very important” goal, up from a record low of 28.1% in 2000.

Given this heartening development, it might be tempting to conclude that American education need not concern itself with preparation for citizenship since young people have become more engaged on their own. I would argue that the picture is far more complex. First, a CIRCLE study found that young people make what is called the “transition to adulthood”—for example, leaving home and having a stable career—later today than they once did, which makes it harder for them to have political influence and to encounter opportunities to develop civic skills and networks. College can help with this. In fact, 70% of young people who voted in the 2008 presidential election had at least one semester of college experience, but only half of Americans attend college before they turn 30, which points to the need to provide affordable college educations to more Americans and better civic education in high school for those who do not continue to college. Even students who graduate from college, however, are more likely to move from job to job until they are well into their 30s, which means they may have little incentive or opportunity to “settle in” to a community.

Young would-be voters also have many structural obstacles to overcome. As Connery observed, states have increasingly adopted stringent voter ID laws and strategically located polling places in ways that disenfranchise young people. I could certainly talk at length on this point given my own experiences registering college students last fall.

In addition, while young people did actively participate in the most recent presidential campaign, it is unclear whether they will continue their efforts to influence

government. The Higher Education Research Institute, for instance, found that among first-year students surveyed between 2004 and 2008, only 19% rated “influencing the political structure” as essential or very important. Moreover, the higher volume of young people volunteering in other areas of the civic realm is commendable, but the potential danger of a focus on such volunteer work—for example, at the local food bank—if unaccompanied by attentiveness to other political dimensions, is that it may prevent students from seeing the larger political structures that function to create inequality in the first place and from acting to change those structures. In the context of the Obama campaign, yes, young people helped him get elected, but will they continue to work both to push his administration in particular policy directions and/or to shape the decisions of the legislators with whom he must deal?

Even if young people have the opportunities and interest in substantive civic involvement, however, many remain remarkably uninformed both about how civic institutions work and about current events. Galston reported in 2007, “Today’s college graduates know no more about politics than high school graduates did fifty years ago, and today’s high school graduates are no more knowledgeable than were the high school dropouts of the past.” In regard to current events, Mindich found that individuals in the age group of 18-24 are far less likely to pay attention to news coverage from newspapers, news magazines, radio, or television than previous generations. For example, young women are more apt to read *Cosmopolitan* and young men to read *Maxim* than they are to read *Newsweek* or *Time*. Nor are young people turning to the Internet for news. According to Mindich, a 2002 survey that asked

respondents ages 18-24 about their preferred news source found that only 11 percent picked the Internet. Even when students feel passionately about an issue, they can exhibit an appalling lack of knowledge about it and/or how they might act upon their convictions. For instance, a number of students in my Principles of Rhetoric course three years ago were shocked to learn that if they submitted a letter to the editor that they would actually have to sign their names. Students—and non-students, too, for that matter—also frequently demonstrate an inability to deliberate; rather, their tendency is to advocate their own position and to attack their opposition, often with little evidence, in forums that range from community meetings to blogs and email messages. These displays, while perhaps emotionally satisfying, do little to shed light on the issue at hand and frequently exhibit a shocking lack of civility. Rather than seeing themselves as part of a larger community, participants view those who disagree with them as enemy dragons to be slain. In sum, while many bright spots regarding civic engagement in the populace as a whole and among young people particularly can be found, reasons for genuine concern still remain.

I have, thus far, painted a rather gloomy picture tracing the downfall of public speaking as a liberal art; the retreat of colleges and universities from their original mission of educating citizens; and the problematic quantity and quality of civic engagement in the 21st century United States. I am by nature, though, an optimistic person, and—despite the challenges—I truly believe there is much to be optimistic about.

First, while higher education as a whole has often disregarded civic engagement in recent years, leadership in our profession—such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Association for Higher Education, for instance—has increasingly focused time, attention, and resources on this issue, as the large volume of recent publications on civic engagement and pedagogy in higher education attests. Furthermore, we have reason to be proud of the communication discipline to which Zlotkowski pointed in 2000 as a “notable” exception to disciplines’ typical indifference to the call for civic engagement because he said the National Communication Association, under the leadership of Jim Applegate, had “demonstrated a strong commitment to service and social engagement—a commitment that has already had a significant effect” on national programming.

Second, the context outside academe holds promise, too. Leyden and Teixeira point out that the millennial generation—composed of many of you here, those individuals born between 1978 and 1996, and sometimes dubbed the echo boom—is larger than the baby boom generation. Like its predecessor, this generation will be the “pig in the python,” influencing society due to its numbers alone. I’ve already noted the positive news about 2008’s first-year students and their heightened interest in politics. In addition, the Harvard Institute of Politics has found that millennials are less cynical about political action, with 60 percent agreeing that political action is an effective way to solve important issues facing the country and 71 percent agreeing that political action is effective in solving important local issues. Census data also shows that this generation is ethnically more diverse, making its members more open to other

points of view. In short, if ever there were a generation poised to renew citizen engagement, it's this one. Add to this context the election of Barack Obama. Regardless of one's political views, his election has brought about a renewed interest in both rhetoric and politics.

Those of us who are scholar-teachers of rhetoric are in a position to seize this moment by renewing the link between public speaking and democratic practices in our undergraduate teaching. I want to suggest that there are three main ways in which we might do this: using our classrooms as a forum for civic engagement, extending our pedagogy beyond the classroom, and supporting undergraduate research.

First, let me address how we can use our classrooms as a forum for civic engagement. One way to do so is to revitalize our commitment to teaching undergraduates how to speak and how to deliberate. At some schools, particularly small schools, this may mean taking steps to ensure that more specialized courses don't push out courses on public speaking and on argumentation and debate. It may also call for a consideration of Communication Across the Curriculum efforts, with all the challenges that they entail. While one recurrent criticism of public deliberation has been that not everyone in society gets to participate, and not everyone has the resources and skills to be equal participants, I would counter that it is in our public speaking and debate courses where we have the chance to equalize the playing field a bit. We can't control the curricula that students are exposed to before they get to us, nor the families or communities where they grow up, but we can offer those students who reach us a

rhetorical education, which is not an insignificant act. As Hart put it, “Freedom goes to the articulate,” and through our classes, we can “peddle freedom.”

In this context, classrooms become community forums, or what Eberly has referred to as “protopublic spaces,” where students “encounter each other as deliberating bodies, something that large lecture classes that focus only on rhetoric as analytical do not allow.” The classroom is not the same as a naturally occurring community, but Campbell argues that the inequalities between the teacher and student “faithfully mirror the conditions of post-modern life and the challenges to democratic practice that it poses.” The public speaking classroom also demands that students use critical reasoning to construct their speeches for an actual audience, to make judgments about the subjects of others’ addresses, and to critique others’ presentations in terms of their support, strategy, delivery, audience adaptation, and so on. In addition, students learn to reflect upon the judgments they themselves make in constructing their speeches. The classroom also provides a safe community in which to learn and, yes, in which to make mistakes. In my own experience, the give-and-take of speeches and responses in the public speaking or debate classroom fosters an environment in which people come to know each other well, learn to disagree respectfully, and tend to support one another in both failure and success, despite their differences. Students also learn what it means to become a community *through* deliberation, which means grappling with both assent and conflict.

Beyond revitalizing our commitment to courses in public speaking and debate, we need to provide more assignments in both those courses and other communication

courses that not only teach such skills, but also establish the relationship between rhetorical ways of knowing and doing and civic participation. Let me do a plug here, if I may, for a new textbook that can serve as an excellent resource for such purposes—Hogan, Andrews, Andrews, and Williams' *Public Speaking and Civic Engagement*, which does a delightful job of thoroughly integrating civic engagement into every single facet of its instruction, including how to be a responsible listener. Beyond recommending this resource, let me suggest that we can, for example, have students draw on newspaper articles, from both campus and national publications, for in-class exercises and homework. As a public speaking assignment, I've also found it effective to use an approach that Griffin calls invitational speaking: having students present their views on a controversial issue and then having them engage in discussion with the class about it, after which they must modify their prepared conclusion in light of the discussion. Students usually prepare for this assignment with trepidation, but it clearly is an empowering experience for them, for they not only learn about public speaking, but they also frequently report being more informed, more confident about articulating their views in public, and—as students often put it—“more political.”

Other methods also abound. McMillan and Harriger taught deliberative skills using National Issues Forum books, moderating class efforts more closely early on as students learned how to speak, how to listen, and how to consider whose voices were not being represented. In a recent publication, McMillan and Harriger reported that sophomores who had learned deliberation in this way volunteered at almost the same rate as their sophomore cohorts who were not in the program, but they were 15% more

likely to vote in a state or federal election and 23% more likely to read a newspaper. Campbell recommends an assignment in which both a team in favor of a policy and a team opposed to a policy must argue for their own position, but from the perspective of the values and ideals of the other team. Through cross-arguing in this way, each side becomes adept at employing the arguments of the other side, thereby opening up the possibility of identification such that opponents can be perceived as adversaries, rather than as enemies. I've found that having students in my Principles of Rhetoric course write a well-supported letter to the campus paper can help prepare them well to enter public deliberation, too. Classroom blogs, moderated by instructors, can serve such purposes, as well, by extending the deliberation of public speaking and the expectations of civility that should accompany public speaking to other media.

Whichever teaching methods we use, we must show students that issues are not just a given, but rather that issues are defined, often strategically, so that some problems receive attention while others do not, and so that particular issue definitions will lead to particular policy resolutions. Students must learn that public deliberation is, in Welsh's words, "inherently competitive and cooperative as political actors struggle over common vocabularies and prevailing meanings." Even more traditional teaching methods, such as providing exemplary texts, can serve this purpose. Students who study both Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream," for instance, can learn how Lincoln used his speech to redefine the Declaration of Independence as the nation's founding document, and how King then used that premise to redefine the United States' treatment of African Americans. Similar points

can be made by having students examine controversies on campus and the differing ways in which various parties define them. Starting in the summer of 2009, instructors of public speaking and other rhetoric classes will have a new online resource available for such purposes, too, in the form of Voices of Democracy, a NEH-sponsored web project designed to promote the study of great speeches and public debates in undergraduate humanities classrooms.

In using our classrooms as forums for civic engagement, we also need to encourage students to examine messages more critically—not more cynically—regardless of their source or political position. This means that we need to be careful about how we talk about rhetoric. While I realize that I am preaching to the choir in regard to my colloquy participants, I would ask those of you who are students or faculty and staff from other areas to consider this matter carefully, as well. The epithet that I particularly have in mind here is “mere rhetoric!” To discount rhetoric in this way, however, is also to discount the power of both Susan B. Anthony’s platform speeches on behalf of women’s suffrage, as well as the insidious appeal of David Duke’s anti-Semitic webcasts. I am not suggesting that we eliminate criticism, but I am arguing that cynicism in our discourse about rhetoric only feeds the cynicism that many people already feel. Instead, let’s foster a healthy skepticism about rhetoric, along with an appreciation for its potential for transformation. The truth is, if you are unhappy with our political system, you can give up, use violence to bring about change, or work democratically for change within the existing political structure. If you want to do the latter, you need rhetoric. It’s not the only tool you will need, but it is an indispensable

one. The way that we talk about rhetoric has the potential to enhance or deter the willingness to undertake such difficult democratic work.

A second way to revitalize the link between public speaking and civic engagement is by extending our teaching beyond the classroom. In days gone by, this could be accomplished through forensics programs and still can be, provided competitions put the audience back into the picture. For instance, National Debate Tournament or NDT debate today is a ridiculous exercise in which any research and critical thinking skills that competitors may learn is completely obscured by delivery where the students speak as quickly as they possibly can. This has even filtered down to the high school level, which I discovered when I began to assist the Lincoln-Douglas debate team at Wooster High School two years ago. *The policy debate teams there talk as fast as they possibly can, affirming the resolution, backing it with cards and using the double breathe method as if speaking quickly is in and of itself a sign of intelligence.* When two of our Lincoln-Douglas competitors wanted to emulate this speed, I pointed out that I was pretty sure Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Douglas would not have swayed many audiences with such an approach, and I feel certain that Professor Brigrance, who started a highly successful speakers bureau at Wabash during his time here, certainly would have agreed with that assessment.

The main way that we might extend civic engagement outside the classroom, however, is through service learning, which Bringle and Hatcher define as a planned pedagogical activity in which students draw on course concepts to fulfill a community need and to extend their own learning; they further learn from the experience through a

classroom assignment that requires them to reflect on the relationship of the experience to course content and their own development.

I turned to this model myself for a political rhetoric course. Students typically had come to my courses on political rhetoric with a high degree of cynicism, but without the skills necessary to analyze critically; in teaching them to be more analytical, however, I often found that—try as I might not to—I fed their cynicism as well. So it was in the fall of 2000 that I created a Politics-in-Action Project at Wooster, modeled on a similar Problems in Public Relations course that I had taught at Purdue. In this project, students had to choose a political problem, write and enact a proposal for some form of communication action that might help alleviate the problem, and reflect on their project through a formal presentation. The projects themselves varied a great deal, including a voter registration program, an information campaign and petition drive on behalf of Afghan women (a full year prior to 9/11, mind you), and an issue campaign for the Wayne County Office of Rural Land Preservation. Through the Politics-in-Action Project, students gained a better understanding of concepts related to political rhetoric, learned skills needed to be meaningfully involved in politics, and developed a greater appreciation for both the difficulties and rewards associated with political action. As one student observed midway through his group's project, "This is harder than it looks."

This is not to say that service learning is a perfect solution. For one thing, it takes extra time, although with experience an instructor can implement service learning with greater ease. There is also the question of whether all service learning really contributes

to *democratic* engagement. As the New England Resource Center for Higher Education's just released white paper points out, service learning often involves campus "experts," whether faculty or students, sharing their expertise with the public, but this is not the same as democratic engagement, where campus and community members share "authority and power in all aspects of the relationship, from defining problems, choosing approaches, addressing issues, developing the final products, and participating in assessment." Martin Carcasson, who founded and directs the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State provides us with an excellent example of how students, faculty, and community members can truly work together toward democratic problem solving.

However, for those of us unable to muster the resources needed for such an enterprise, service learning in one's rhetoric classes can be quite beneficial. Research consistently shows that service learning helps students learn the course material better than they otherwise would and enhances critical thinking. In addition, service learning is more successful at promoting a sense of civic responsibility than service that is done independently by the student or through other organized activities because it combines two forms of learning that have been closely associated with civic education: problem-based learning, where students focus on real-world problems, and collaborative learning, where students have to work with others.

A final way that we can uphold public speaking as a liberal art is through promoting undergraduate research. I am adamant on this point—in part because I am blessed to work at an institution that puts undergraduate research at the core of its

mission. At The College of Wooster, all graduating seniors must complete a two-semester research project called Independent Study, or “IS” for short, in which they work with a faculty mentor on a project of their choosing and deliver a formal presentation of their ongoing research to faculty and their peers. In the spring, seniors hand in a completed thesis of 100+ pages and must defend their thesis in an oral exam with an advisor and a second reader.

This year, as always, the topics my students have chosen to tackle vary a great deal: the analysis of the persuasive appeals of Olympic bid books, Obama’s speech on race, professional athletes’ use of apologia or the rhetoric of self defense, and the messages of ecotourism websites, to name a few. Through such research, students strengthen their ability to analyze rhetoric generally, a valuable skill for all citizens. Chapman also found that undergraduate research not only prepares students for graduate school, but also benefits students who choose not to continue their formal education by helping them learn how “to develop a nuanced thesis,” “to seek out supporting materials,” and to organize them into a coherent argument, all attributes that can help make one a better citizen, as well.

And while I don’t have time to elaborate, it’s worth pointing out that studies show participating in research improves student self-confidence and patience, that such experiences can be especially beneficial to students who are defined as at risk or underrepresented in a field of study, and that research experiences can help first-year students and sophomores focus their undergraduate experience. Regardless of who they are, undergraduate research helps students to see the connections between their

disciplinary knowledge and the public realm—connections that may continue to enrich their perspective long after they have graduated.

We therefore should provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to carry out research—knowledge and skills they presumably should get in their coursework—and encourage their research efforts by involving them in our research, helping them with their own, and letting them know about conference opportunities. Lastly, we must celebrate their research and encourage them to share it with others. In my department, we honor the research of every student who completes IS with an informal poster session at our Senior Open House on graduation weekend. This year, the entire campus will close down for one Friday in April to enjoy “A Moveable Feast,” where students, faculty, and community members can attend brief presentations by seniors on their completed projects and also enjoy munchies provided by local restaurants.

In our time together this afternoon, I have offered a glance at why public speaking is a liberal art and how it fell from grace, the withdrawal of higher education from the mission of preparing students for citizenship, and the decline in civic engagement, especially among young people. At the same time, I have pointed to signs of hope in the efforts of some quarters of higher education and communication in particular, and the characteristics of the millennial generation and the current political context. Finally, I have suggested how teacher-scholars of rhetoric might enhance the rhetorical educations that undergraduates receive by employing the classroom as a

forum for civic engagement, extending pedagogy beyond the classroom, and promoting undergraduate research.

The historic rallying cry at Wabash sporting events is “Wabash always fights!” However, no less venerable a figure than Wabash’s own Professor Brigance would say that in our civic life the problem is, all too often, that people choose to fight rather than to talk. In *Speech: Its Techniques and Disciplines in a Free Society*, Brigance maintained that students must learn to speak for several reasons: “To keep a free society free. To settle differences by talk instead of force. To alter and promote thought. To water and cultivate ideas, hopes, sentiments, and enthusiasms in a way and to a degree that cannot be done while we are separated from one another.” By acting on this concept of public speaking as a liberal art, but updating pedagogical practices for our time, we can offer students the rhetorical education for citizenship that our democracy so desperately needs.

Sources

- Beebe, Steven A., and Susan J. Beebe. *Public Speaking Handbook*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2005."
- Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg. "Isocrates." *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001.
- Bostdorff, Denise M. "Preparing Undergraduates for Democratic Citizenship: Upholding the Legacy of William Norwood Brigance through Rhetorical Education." *Rhetoric & Democracy: Pedagogical and Political Practices*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008. 39-74.
- Connery, Michael. "The Youth Vote: A Matter of Access, Not Apathy." *The Nation*. Posted 6 Aug. 2008. <http://alternet.org/story/94040/>
- Dahl, Melissa. "Youth Vote May Have Been Key in Obama's Win." 5 Nov. 2008. MSNBC.com. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27525497>
- Danisch, Robert. *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007.
- DeVito, Joseph A. *The Essential Elements of Public Speaking*. 2nd ed. Boston: Pearson, 2006.
- Flanagan, Constance, Peter Levine, and Richard Settersten. *Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood*. 21 Jan. 2009. Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement. <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=327>
- Fort, Lyman M. *Speech for All*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1944.
- "Gesture Drills." *The Complete Speaker*. Chicago: n.p., 1898.

- Griffin, Cindy L. *Invitation to Public Speaking*. Toronto, Ontario: Wadsworth, 2004.
- Harriger, Katy J., and Jill J. McMillan. *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2007.
- Hodge, David, Paul LePore, Kira Pasquesi, and Marissa Hirsch. "It Takes a Curriculum: Preparing Students for Research & Creative Work." *Liberal Education*, Summer 2008, 6-15.
- Hogan, J. Michael, ed. *Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003.
- . "Rhetorical Pedagogy and Democratic Citizenship: Reviving the Traditions of Civic Engagement and Public Deliberation." *Rhetoric & Democracy: Pedagogical and Political Practices*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008. 75-97.
- Hogan, J. Michael, Patricia Hayes Andrews, James R. Andrews, and Glen Williams. *Public Speaking and Civic Engagement*. Boston, MA: Pearson, 2008.
- Isocrates. *Antidosis*. Trans. George Norlin. In *Isocrates*, 3 vols. London: William Heinemann and New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1919.
- Jarratt, Susan C. *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991.
- Kearney, Patricia, and Timothy G. Plax. *Public Speaking in a Diverse Society*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1996.
- Keith, William. "On the Origins of Speech as a Discipline: James A. Winans and Public Speaking as Practical Democracy." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38 (2008): 239-258.

- Kiesa, Abby, and Karlo Barrios Marcelo. "Youth Demographics—Youth with No College Experience." Jan. 2009. Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement. FS08_YthDemo_CollExp.pdf. www.civicyouth.org
- Law, Robert O. *The International Speaker and Popular Elocutionist*. Chicago: International Publishing Company, 1895.
- Leyden, Peter, and Ruy Teixeira with Eric H. Greenberg. *The Progressive Politics of the Millennial Generation*. 21 June 2007. New Politics Institute.
http://www.newpolitics.net/content_areas/reports
- Lucas, Stephen E. *The Art of Public Speaking*. 8th ed. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004.
- Osborn, Michael, and Suzanne Osborn. *Public Speaking*. 6th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Saltmarsh, J., M. Hartley, and P.H. Clayton. *Democratic Engagement White Paper*. Boston, MA: New England Resource Center for Higher Education, 2009.
- Schiappa, Edward, with David M. Timmerman. "Aristotle's Disciplining of Epideictic." *The Beginnings of Rhetorical Theory in Classical Greece*. Ed. Edward Schiappa. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999), 185-206.
- Timmerman, David. M., and Todd F. McDorman. "Introduction: *Rhetoric and Democracy*." *Rhetoric & Democracy: Pedagogical and Political Practices*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008. xi-xxxv.
- Tisch, Jonathan M. "Youth Turnout Rate Rises to at Least 52%." 7 Nov. 2008. Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement.
<http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=323>

“Voter Turnout 2008.” Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network. A National Nonpartisan Project of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits.

<http://www.nonprofitvote.org/voteturnout>

West, Robert, *Purposive Speaking*. New York: Macmillan, 1924.

Wilson, John F., and Carroll C. Arnold. *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*. Boston: 1964; Allyn and Bacon, 1965.

Wyer, Kathy. “Political Engagement Among College Freshmen Hits 40-Year High.” UCLA Press Release. 22 Jan. 2009. www.newsroom.ucla.edu