

The Case for Public Discourse

Democracy and the study and practice of rhetoric share a dynamic association that served as the basis of the communication field and provides a path for its future. I leave the delineation of that vital relationship to others whose scholarship and skill positions them better than I to articulate the foundation on which this colloquy and this paper are based. My purpose is to suggest a direction and a specific path to intensify and resituate the primacy of the relationship between civic involvement and rhetorical training in the communication classroom. At Gustavus Adolphus College, a small liberal arts college, my colleagues and I instituted a course that confirms the call for this colloquy, and, while our pursuit appears innovative, it is, in fact, a familiar reiteration of the rhetorical tradition. Our new initiative is presented as *one* model that accentuates the relationship between rhetoric, citizenship, and public discourse. Before presenting our model, three fundamental principles provide context and rationale for our action in relationship to the call for this colloquy.

Public Speaking in the Twenty-First Century

First, foundational instruction in Communication Studies should be inextricably linked with rhetoric and civic involvement and central to a liberal arts education.

Second, the present Public Speaking course as iterated in textbooks and as generally conceived fails to provide students a strong rhetorical grounding or an understanding of civic involvement.

Third, the challenges of twenty-first century democracy require more from the field than a Public Speaking course grounded in liberal arts, rhetoric, and civic life.

As the quality of civic life has been called into question,¹ we in communication have sought to reinvigorate our instruction through refinements in Public Speaking. Textbooks, conference panels, papers, and assignments have featured civic engagement, democracy, and citizenship, but most are offered as mere adornments that maintain the vast ancillary materials and content that originally displaced rhetoric and civic involvement. With each addition to Public Speaking, rhetoric—audience, argument, analysis, and appropriate action—is further diluted, leaving very little space to discuss or practice civic engagement or the rhetorical grounding that is needed to embrace civic life fully and thoughtfully. Rather than adornments, rhetoric and civic involvement must be the foundation for all assignments and content. Any effort to truly re-infuse rhetoric and civic involvement in Public Speaking requires a close examination of the course content and assignments as well as the distinctive rhetorical requirements of twenty-first century democracy.

While the first two principles reiterate the call, the third principle, admittedly a late addition to our own initiative, challenges the call by arguing that we need to reconsider Public Speaking in its entirety in order to provide meaningful instruction in rhetoric for the twenty-first century.

¹ Most commonly cited, Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2000).

Brigance remains correct that a “free society cannot exist without [public speaking]” and that “every citizen in every free society needs to be trained in its discipline,” but, in a representative democracy of 300 million individuals situated in a global community, public speaking, while still important, is not the most prominent or effective discourse in many iterations of contemporary citizenship.² Engaged citizenship in this technological and global climate also requires writing, use of visuals, symbolic action, and the ability to engage in productive, reasoned discussion, and the effective use and analysis of each of these is dependent on an understanding of rhetoric. In short, with apologies to Brigance, a *twenty-first century* democracy lives in constant danger unless its *citizens* are trained in *rhetoric, allowing them to comprehend, analyze, and effectively use multiple channels of discourse.*³

Effective civic discourse—research, argument construction for an audience, channel choice, presentation, refutation, assessment, and determination of future arguments and audiences—is a distinctly rhetorical process, the historical core of public speaking instruction, and the same whether the discourse is oral, written, or computer mediated. Regaining this central core in contemporary public speaking instruction is imperative, and expanding its reach beyond speeches positions the course as clearly fundamental for citizenship and a liberal arts education.

Such a course should not be a survey of different channels of advocacy. Instruction should still focus on speech making, but students would understand that the same processes are at work in effective writing, visuals, and symbolic action and be able to apply their knowledge across disciplines in a variety of courses and contexts. Nor should this course provide mere practice for real world advocacy. Instruction in civic discourse or engaged citizenship cannot be premised on preparing students for hypothetical contributions if they choose to become involved. Rather than esoteric study or practice in a laboratory, students must be actively engaged in community issues; they must perform in the world as citizens.

Public Discourse—A Case Study

At Gustavus Adolphus College, the Communication Studies Department struggled for over a decade with Public Speaking as a foundational course in the major and as a general education course in the liberal arts. We wished students to be more prepared for advanced instruction in rhetoric and analysis, be involved and interested in their communities, and reflect both in their work in the major, their time at the college, and in their lives beyond college. In short, our rationale for change echoed the call for this colloquy:

And, sadly, too often, public speaking courses do not provide the essential skills citizens require. Instead, they are taught purely as basic skills courses that stress the fundamental expertise required to conduct an effective speech without regard for its role in democracy, its relationship to leadership, or its standing as part of the discipline of rhetoric.⁴

Over the years, refinements resulted in a rhetorically based Public Speaking course with speeches on community issues and speeches given in the community that still left us unsatisfied,

² William Norwood Brigance. “Demagogues, “good” people, and teachers of speech.” *The Speech Teacher* 1 (1952): 158.

³ *Ibid.*, 160-161. Brigance may have agreed, as his instruction in “speech making” was rhetorical training.

⁴ The Brigance Colloquy on Public Speaking as a Liberal Art (conference call), 1.

as we knew that we could and should do better in fulfilling the mission of the college and of a liberal arts education.

Perceived and real expectations of Public Speaking held by community members (faculty and students), the field, and instructors presented the main obstacle to further refinements. Reframing the question from how to fix Public Speaking to how to achieve rhetoric training and civic engagement in our foundational major and general education course resulted in the emergence of “Public Discourse” as a more accurate representation of what we wished to accomplish. Public Discourse freed us to construct a course with a classical foundation in rhetoric and argument, in-class modeling of the types of speeches employed by citizens, and a practicum in engaged citizenship.

Public Discourse, in our initial conception, was to be a course in public argument in which each student would complete an assignment that directly engaged them with a community. As a result of our experience with speeches on community issues and speeches in the community, we knew that these would not be sufficient. We discussed a number of options, including group work (which was rejected because our policy that group process must be taught in any class with a significant group assignment) and placements in community organizations (which was rejected because those placements are often uneven and, even when tremendous, might not be meaningful to a particular student). Three parameters emerged for the student civic engagement piece. First, to be meaningful, civic involvement must arise from student interests. Second, engaging individual student interests in the community requires a structured assignment. Third, rhetoric and a required rhetorical act must be central to that assignment. The weight of these conclusions combined with the rhetorical focus of the course led to the Civic Engagement Project.

The Civic Engagement Project is a semester-long, sequential, multi-part assignment that culminates in direct civic action. Students select a community issue, research it thoroughly determining the causes and effects of the problem as well as possible solutions, establish an appropriate solution or next step, determine an appropriate action in the community to move forward, and directly take action in the community. Two in-class speeches emphasize speech making, and course content—the rhetorical situation, stock issues for deliberative discourse, evidence, reasoning, organization, argument construction, refutation, and persuasion—provides the requisite foundation for successfully completing the speeches and the components of the civic engagement project. In short, Public Discourse is a course in speech making that utilizes the same rhetorical foundation as a process for effective civic advocacy; thus, the course is an unintentional but apt channeling of Brigrance.

In completing their actions, students give speeches to governmental organizations and community agencies, they meet one-on-one with mayors, legislators, corporate heads, and the college president and vice presidents, they write letters to editors, they carry on information campaigns and petition drives, and they hold large events to raise awareness and money for causes. In short, they act in communities as citizens. While we did not foresee this, Public Discourse allows students pursue the study and use of rhetoric as oral, written, symbolic action, and reasoned discussion, a demonstration of twenty-first century citizenship.

The outcomes of Public Discourse reach beyond what we intended or expected. Students receive more focused instruction in rhetoric, an instruction that they are able to use successfully in their writing, speaking, and analysis in advanced courses in the department and in their future lives as citizens. Students learn a process for civic involvement and develop passion for it. Nearly 90 percent of students plan on maintaining active involvement in the community, and, more significant than the statistic are their adamant statements that they will “not hesitate to take action.”⁵

Student action has resulted in change and community conversations. As a result of the first year of Public Discourse, a Minnesota town has smoke-free parks, the campus cafeteria has food allergen labeling, the campus bathrooms have environmentally-sound hand dryers, low-income high school students participate in band thanks to an instrument drive, the College installed handicap access-buttons on doors throughout campus, Chicago has a new bike lane to provide safe transportation, a high school has a new health-fitness program, the campus has gender-neutral housing, and an inaugural fibromyalgia campaign raised over \$10,000 dollars and is now a model for the Arthritis Foundation. Other projects resulted in on-going community conversations, and every project brought attention to a community issue.

Surprisingly, despite giving one-third of the required speeches of Public Speaking and the absence of performative aspects in the course, students in Public Discourse report more gains in public speaking skills, in confidence, and in desire and ability to give speeches in the future.⁶ Final in-class advocacy speeches in Public Discourse show no significant differences in delivery and much stronger argument, evidence, and overall case construction than Public Speaking final speeches. We wrongly assumed de-emphasizing public speaking would result in less skill. In practice, in addition to strong training in rhetoric, students in Public Discourse possess interest, expertise, and commitment, the same attributes of effective citizen advocates; naturally, their speeches are fundamentally sounder and presented with confidence and poise.

The research process, most of which takes place beyond the library, requires students to be resourceful and persistent and to acquire and use information literacy tools. Student research provides meaningful (perhaps just as meaningful as the actual action) interactions with community leaders. The interactions with community members and the many projects that result in one-on-one and small group meetings employ the type of civic discussion—a real attempt to talk out problems—that Brigrance valued in democratic society.⁷ Students learn firsthand that reasoned discussion and presentation of their ideas is more effective, and the responsibility of a presentation in the community motivates research and results in strong, well-developed arguments. They also learn how communities work and encounter engaged citizens, and the community members involved, both as resources and targets of action, praise and support the course.

⁵ Leila Brammer and Sarah Wolter, “Assessing student response to Public Discourse, an introductory course in speaking, argument, and civic engagement” (paper presented to the National Communication Association Annual Convention, San Diego, CA., November 2008), 18-19 .

⁶ Ibid., 21-22.

⁷ Brigrance, 161.

Just as speeches in Public Speaking result in a wealth of information, student projects and the distinct camaraderie among students offer a broad and deep learning experience. Students become aware not just of their own issue but of other issues, communities, resources, and types of actions. In this way, the course operates in practice as a survey course in community involvement and provides students numerous examples from their projects, their communities, and their peers for their lives as engaged citizens.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities in their *Liberal Education and America's Promise* establishes four essential learning outcomes for college students—Knowledge and Human Cultures and Natural World, Intellectual and Practical Skills, Personal and Social Responsibility, and Integrative Learning.⁸ Public Speaking accomplishes one of the subset of Practical Skills—Oral Communication—and, if rhetorically approached, might also include the skills of Inquiry and Analysis, Critical and Creative Thinking, and Information Literacy. Public Discourse covers the gamut of essential liberal education outcomes, particularly Intellectual and Practical Skills, Personal and Social Responsibility, and Integrative Learning.

Public Discourse and its practicum in argument and civic engagement is a transformational educational experience for students, the community, and for our department. This course resituates speech making in its rhetorical foundation as a liberal art and prepares citizens to actively engage in their communities. The current department strategic plan reflects awareness that students will expect more from the department and that this course will drive modifications in our curriculum. We are prepared and believe that this course and the impending developments will provide one exemplar of twenty-first century undergraduate liberal arts communication education.

At the beginning of a new century, at a time of heightened civic awareness, and on the eve of its centennial, the field has an opportunity to capitalize on the moment. To do so, we must recognize that our students need training in audience, argument, analysis, and appropriate action for speaking, writing, visuals, and symbolic action as professionals and citizens in a global society. We must create foundational and advanced courses worthy of the needs of twenty-first century democracy, central to a liberal arts education, and reflective of the fullness of the field. We must reexamine the content and assignments of Public Speaking and all of our courses, and, perhaps, at the foundational level, we should adopt “Public Discourse,” a name that more accurately reflects our history, the current field, and contemporary democracy.

Public Discourse at Gustavus is one example of instruction that returns the field to its foundation with a renewed relevance and provides liberally educated persons with skills, experience, and passion for engaged citizenship. I look forward to other, even better, innovations that will restore our rhetorical foundation, allow us reclaim currency in the liberal arts and in our global society, and create opportunities for us to shape an engaged polis.

⁸ National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise. *College Learning for the New Global Century* (Executive Summary) (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008), 3.