

## Teaching Public Speaking as a Liberal Art: A Case for Classical Texts

Brigance Colloquy Position Paper

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I have just completed yet another survey for a public speaking textbook publisher seeking feedback on what I want in a textbook. Do I want quick tips? Audio reviews of key terms? Online homework management systems? An e-version of the textbook?

No, no, no, and no.

I have shared the same answers with the publishing representatives who stop by my office, and they invariably ask, “Well, what *do* you want?” What I would love to see, I tell them, is a revival of the classical tradition. “Do you have a good translation of Cicero,” I ask, “aimed at public speaking students? Or maybe a compilation of great readings from ancient rhetoric, with a commentary and contemporary examples?” Not surprisingly, the answer is always, “No.”

If public speaking is to be taught, as noted in the call for this colloquy, “in a manner that reflects rhetoric’s origin as a liberal art,” we should be using course materials that best reflect that origin, namely, primary works from the classical tradition. Such texts offer a powerful articulation of the relationship between rhetoric and public life while addressing significant and enduring questions about rhetoric (e.g., Is it an art? Can it be taught? What kind of knowledge is required of orators? Why study it?). Although any number of ancient readings would be useful in a classically oriented public speaking course, I focus in this paper on one text, Cicero’s *De Oratore* (*The Ideal Orator*), as a particularly fitting option for teaching public speaking as a liberal art. In what follows, I will first address liberal education, generally, then discuss *De Oratore* as a textbook well-suited to this aim, though not without its limitations.

### On Liberal Education

Before making a case for *De Oratore*, I should first address what it means to teach *any* subject as a liberal art. My understanding of liberal education is strongly informed by the work of John Henry Newman, particularly *The Idea of a University* (1852), wherein Newman offers an eloquent articulation of the ends and means of liberal education. According to Newman, the primary end of a liberal education “is

simply the cultivation of the intellect . . . , and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence” (92). Intellectual excellence, according to Newman, is “an acquired faculty of judgment, of clear-sightedness, of sagacity, of wisdom, of philosophical reach of mind, and of self-possession and repose” (115). Such habits of mind are essential for the discernment of truth. As Newman explains:

Truth of whatever kind is the proper object of the intellect; its cultivation then lies in fitting it to apprehend and contemplate truth. Now the intellect in its present state, with exceptions that need not here be specified, does not discern truth intuitively, or as a whole. We know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going round an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation, of many partial notions, by the employment, concentration, and joint action of many faculties and exercises of mind. (114)

The mental process Newman describes in this passage results in philosophical, or liberal, knowledge. “Knowledge,” writes Newman, “is called by the name of Science or Philosophy, when it is acted upon, informed, or if I may use a strong figure, impregnated by Reason” (84). The path to such knowledge, importantly, is through education, not instruction. As Newman explains, methods of instruction “have little or no effect upon the mind itself, are contained in rules committed to memory, to tradition, or to use, and bear upon an end external to themselves. But education is a higher word; it implies an action on our mental nature, and the formation of character” (86). While instruction is suited to instrumental, utilitarian ends (as is the case with public speaking courses oriented toward career skills), education aims at knowledge as an end in itself.

If we accept Newman’s claims about liberal education, then teaching public speaking as a liberal art should aim primarily at the cultivation of the mind, with an emphasis on equipping students to discern “truth of whatever kind.” This is perhaps what Everett Lee Hunt had in mind when, in one of the first issues of the *Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking* (now *QJS*), he identified the *sine qua non* of public speaking classes as “the interesting mind” (28). With respect to means and methods, a liberal arts approach to public speaking would embrace education rather than instruction, in Newman’s sense of the distinction. Formulaic templates, rules, and quick tips for captivating listeners, all popular methods of instruction, would be rejected in favor of the careful and systematic contemplation of significant

questions in the realm of rhetoric. Through such means, students pursue philosophical knowledge, not simply technical know-how.

### **The Case for Cicero**

Not surprisingly, John Henry Newman, himself liberally educated, makes numerous references to ancient authors in his defense of liberal education. One of those authors is Cicero, to whom Newman turns for testimony about the importance of pursuing knowledge for its own sake. Newman quotes the “great Orator” as saying: “for we are all of us drawn to the pursuit of Knowledge; in which to excel we consider excellent, whereas to mistake, to err, to be ignorant, to be deceived, is both an evil and a disgrace” (79). Cicero, who espoused the ideal of wisdom united with eloquence, exemplifies the ideals of a liberal arts education. Who better to add as a “teacher” in the liberal arts-oriented public speaking course?

One might think of a variety of authors who would be just as useful in this respect, among them Aristotle, Isocrates, Plato, and Quintilian. Admittedly, there are a number of passages from these authors’ works that speak powerfully to enduring issues in rhetoric (e.g., Plato on “noble” rhetoric and concern for a just citizenry; Aristotle on the means of persuasion; Isocrates on the difference between pleasing and instructing the crowd; Quintilian on the good person speaking well), but I have chosen to focus on *De Oratore*, written in 55 B.C., as a core text primarily because of its relatively comprehensive synthesis of ancient rhetorical wisdom. With respect to its suitability for the liberal arts-oriented public speaking course, the text has three major strengths: 1) a clear emphasis on the intellectual character of public speaking, 2) an explicit rejection of rules-based teaching, and 3) an engaging dialogue format that enacts the intellectual habits of mind that we hope to foster in students.

Throughout *De Oratore*, Cicero makes clear that oratory is an intellectual pursuit, and a difficult one, at that. Cicero articulates this position almost immediately, differentiating himself from his brother Quintus, to whom he writes, “I maintain that eloquence is founded upon the intellectual accomplishments of the most learned; you, on the other hand, believe that it has nothing to do with the refinements of education, but is, rather, one of the things that depend on natural ability and practice” (*De Or.* 1.5). Cicero

then speculates about why so few speakers distinguish themselves, attributing it to “the incredible scope and difficulty of oratory” (1.17). After cataloging the knowledge and abilities a speaker must possess, Cicero once again emphasizes the intellectual dimension of oratory, claiming that “it will be impossible for anyone to be an orator endowed with all praiseworthy qualities, unless he has gained a knowledge of all the important subjects and arts” (1.20). The ideal speaker, in short, must be liberally educated, for “unless the orator has firmly grasped the underlying subject matter, his speech will remain an utterly empty, yes, almost childish verbal exercise” (1.20).

Cicero’s emphasis on the intellectual character of public speaking is reflected in his rejection of rigid rules of rhetoric, a move consistent with John Henry Newman’s rejection of technique-oriented instruction as a means of liberally educating students. Describing his approach in *De Oratore*, Cicero states, “I shall not draw upon the elementary schooling that we received long ago as boys, and present some string of precepts. Instead, I will write about the things that, as I was once told, were the subject of a discussion between our most eloquent speakers, men of the highest possible reputation. Not that I despise what the Greek experts and teachers of oratory have left behind, but those things are evident and readily accessible to all” (1.23). Cicero elaborates on this idea in book 2, wherein the character Antonius explains his problem with the rules (which sound remarkably consistent with contemporary textbook principles for formulating introductions and arranging the parts of a speech). First, the rules are obvious, and second, they suggest a lack of experience with practical oratory. Rhetorical excellence, as Cicero avers, requires “the whole of wisdom, not just . . . rhetorical rules” (2.5).

Instead of rules, Cicero opts to teach through an engaging dialogue format, which is perhaps *De Oratore*’s most noteworthy strength. By presenting an extended conversation among accomplished orators, Cicero is able to provide an account of the basic principles of the art while also addressing significant, enduring questions about rhetoric and oratory. The characters Crassus and Antonius offer opposing views on a number of issues, including the necessity of philosophical knowledge for oratory, the status of rhetoric as an art, and the role of natural talent in the making of an orator. Their conversations not only highlight important questions but also illustrate how to make a strong persuasive case. For

example, Antonius, after being urged to continue conversing, states, “I will indeed go on . . . and I will do what, in my opinion, ought to be done at the beginning of every discussion, that is to formulate what it is that is being discussed” (1.209). Cicero’s interlocutors say a great deal about rhetoric, but students can learn as much, if not more, by observing carefully what those figures *do* in the course of the dialogue.

Cicero’s *De Oratore*, with its strong intellectual orientation, is an attractive option for teaching public speaking as a liberal art, but it may not be the easiest text to use, for several reasons. First, Cicero, like many contemporary textbook authors, illustrates concepts in *De Oratore* with myriad examples, but those examples are ancient and hence would not likely resonate with students (nor with their teachers, for that matter). A second challenge might be student background knowledge, level of intellectual curiosity, and expectations. If students have limited curiosity, limited experience reading challenging texts, and a purely utilitarian view of public speaking, it may be difficult to engage them in *De Oratore*. Teachers with a strong interest in classical rhetoric may be up to that challenge, but not all teachers share this interest, which is a third potential challenge with using Cicero or other classical texts. This challenge might be especially acute in departments like mine, where public speaking is taught almost exclusively by graduate students, few of whom have much interest or expertise in the classical tradition.

These obstacles are daunting but not insurmountable. If Edward Corbett and others could find a way to bring classical rhetoric to the modern student in composition classrooms, I am confident that we could do the same for public speaking.<sup>1</sup> We owe it to our students, and the discipline, to maximize the intellectual potential of our public speaking courses. Using *De Oratore* and other ancient readings would be a promising step in that direction.

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, first published in 1965, and now in its 4<sup>th</sup> edition (1999). As a composition text, the book focuses on three canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, and style.

## References

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