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Beyond Adversarial Communication: Public Speaking and Deliberative Democracy

In thinking through the array of prompts provided to us, my overall answer is that I believe our public speaking courses should to a greater extent than they do currently be designed to confront the flaws of our current political culture and the particular needs of our diverse democracy. With only five pages with which to work, I'll start with a set of bulleted assumptions from which I will be working. I don't necessarily assume all will accept these assumptions, but they nonetheless underlie my perspective as we move forward:

- Democratic societies, particularly diverse democratic societies like ours in the U.S., require a very high quality of public communication and collaborative problem solving, particularly across perspectives, in order to thrive.
- The current quality of public communication and collaborative problem solving is woefully inadequate.
- Some of the reasons for the low quality of public communication are that much of our public communication is overly strategic, adversarial, and primarily designed either to mobilize the "choir" or misrepresent or simplify issues in order to capture the middle. As a result, in our political culture, it often seems like bad arguments are much more effective than good arguments.
- Two particularly important consequences of our overly-adversarial, zero-sum political culture is that: (a) individuals with opposing viewpoints often do not understand each other and have significant difficulty communicating or collaborating, and (b) we tend not to focus on either common ground or the tough choices and underlying value dilemmas I believe are critical to public decision-making in a diverse democracy. The overly adversarial framework typically avoids such tensions, and even punishes political actors that attempt to confront them.
- In our overly adversarial political culture, expert information becomes either politicized, or divorced from politics. With political think tanks, opposing sides simply seek out data that supports their position rather than allowing the data to inform the conclusions impartially. Other experts avoid politics altogether, choosing instead to focus on specifically focused "value free" research that better fits a scientific paradigm, but as a result becomes less useful for public decision-making or problem solving. These issues, combined with the proliferation of information in general due to the internet, have created an information crisis.

When I consider the connections between these issues and the current workings of higher education in general, I am concerned with the lack of engagement. There is no clear response to the quality of our political communication that focuses on improving the culture. Much of the response seems to focus on responding to the symptoms. Too often, academics seem to avoid politics, criticize politics (primarily to each other), or join the fray as adversaries themselves. Their students then take or maintain similar paths.

Higher education is also overly focused in the development of knowledge, rather than the cultivation of wisdom or judgment. In other words, higher education tends not to directly address the information crisis highlighted in the final bullet point, but in some sense contributes to it by compartmentalizing knowledge and discounting the importance of both making connections between disciplines and focusing on how the knowledge should be applied. “Critical thinking” is certainly a welcome buzz term on many campuses, but to what degree are students truly given the tools to wade through information, consider all the intertwined facts, values, and interests from multiple perspectives, and make reasoned judgments? In general, students are much more often equipped with the tools for adversarial democracy, not deliberative democracy.

That brings me to the potential impact of public speaking courses and rhetorical education in general. If institutions of higher education are to take on this challenge, our field is perhaps the best bet. The art of rhetoric has always been connected more or less to the challenge of reasoned judgment in diverse democracies on issues that suffer from uncertain knowledge and competing values. At its best, rhetoric is a civic art that facilitates improved community decision-making and problem solving. Serving in this capacity, rhetorical education would work against the worst aspects of our political culture highlighted in my basic assumptions. At the university level, it would equip students to not simply be good users, consumers, and able critics of rhetoric, but would instill them with the charge and necessary tools to take responsibility for the quality of the communication around them.

But to what degree do our public speaking classes currently take on this challenge? In his book *The Electronic Word*, Richard Lanham discusses the “Weak Defense” and the “Strong Defense” of rhetoric. The weak defense argues that there are “two kinds of rhetoric, good and bad.”¹ “Weak” rhetoric is the common definition and conception of rhetoric most often accepted beyond our departments and classes. In this sense, rhetoric is a tool - the art of “oratory” specifically or “persuasion” in general. It is something that is used by someone to influence others, and thus is typically imagined as unilateral. It is also considered neutral, but those who use it may use it for good or ill. This rhetoric is rhetoric as Aristotle defined it - “the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion.” It is this form of rhetoric that is primarily taught in basic public speaking classes. It is the myriad of hints, tricks, rules, ideas, and methods to make one’s persuasive communication more effective. It primarily

¹ Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.155.

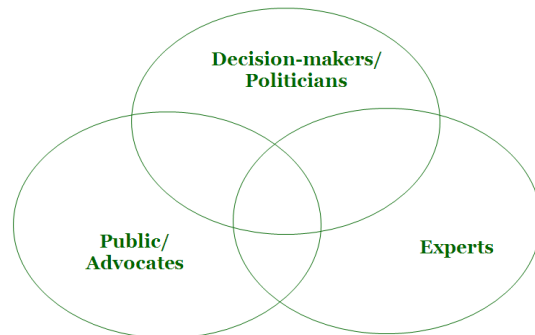
teaches students how to be more successful within the *current* political culture. They become more effective users, consumers, and critics of communication.

The “strong defense” is more difficult to explain, but it transcends the good/bad and considers rhetoric as a critical part of an ideal system of civic discourse. The strong defense of rhetoric defines rhetoric as a theory or system of civic discourse. It is rhetoric from the perspective of Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian. Lanham explained that “the

Strong Defense argues that, since truth comes to mankind [sic] in so many diverse and disagreeing forms, we cannot base a polity upon it. We must, instead, devise some system by which we can agree on a series of contingent operating premises. [That system is rhetoric] . . . the system does all it can to strengthen the decision by arriving at it in a certain way.”² The strong sense of rhetoric takes on a particularly democratic epistemology and collaborative problem-solving ethos, one that is focused on the critical interactions and balance between experts, institutional decision-makers, and the public so necessary to democratic decision-making (see figure above).³ Poulakos, interpreting Isocrates’ view of rhetoric, also offered a strong perspective on rhetoric when he explained that “the art of rhetoric was called upon to address and resolve problems of division and unity, fragmentation and consolidation, diversity and cooperation.” He explained that Isocrates’ strove to “disassociate rhetoric from its reputation as a tool for individual self-advancement and to associate rhetoric instead with social interactions and civil exchanges among human beings.”⁴ Thomas Farrell was focused on the strong sense of rhetoric when he defined rhetoric as “the collaborative art of addressing and guiding decision and judgment—usually public judgment about matters that cannot be decided by force or expertise.”⁵

This strong sense of rhetoric focuses on a system embedded in society that attempts to deal with life’s difficult questions. It respects science and the information such perspectives can provide, but nonetheless realizes that science must inform public questions, but cannot answer them. Chaim Perelman’s work emphasizes the critical importance of dealing with these types of questions. He argued

The Rhetorics of Public Policy



Throgmorton, “The Rhetorics of Policy Analysis,” 1991

² Landham, *The Electronic Word*, p. 156.

³ See Throgmorton, “Rhetorics of Public Policy,” *Policy Science* 24 (1991).

⁴ Poulakos, *Speaking for the Polis: Isocrates’ Rhetorical Education* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 1, 5.

⁵ Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 1.

that a “new” rhetoric was needed, because rational, scientific thought was insufficient to decide many public dilemmas.⁶

In recent years, many scholars, educators, and civic entrepreneurs with no connection to the rhetorical tradition have essentially argued for the development of the strong sense of rhetoric, though they do not use the term. Books like Deborah Stone’s *The Policy Paradox*, Hajer and Wagenaar’s *Deliberative Policy Analysis*, Briand’s *Practical Politics*, Mathews’ *Politics for the People*, Fischer’s *Reframing Public Policy*, Yankelovich’s *Coming to Public Judgment*, etc., all focus on the flaws our current political culture, and the need to develop communication processes and epistemological perspectives that would counteract some of those flaws. Indeed, the entire deliberative democracy movement tied to organizations such as National Issues Forum, Public Agenda, and Everyday Democracy are essentially enacting the strong sense of rhetoric.⁷

Like many other rhetorical scholars before me,⁸ I argue that as we must reinvigorate the presence of the strong sense of rhetoric in our courses and, as Gerard Hauser argued, “reclaim [our] birthright by reasserting the centrality of rhetoric to democratic life in the twenty-first century.”⁹ Admittedly, the public speaking course is only one piece of a larger pie, and I certainly understand that public speaking courses likely will need to remain focused on building practical skills revolving around the canons of rhetoric. Much of the work of providing a significant education in the strong sense of rhetoric will fall to other classes (particularly, I would argue, argumentation and debate and small group communication courses, and, hopefully more and more, “Public Deliberation” classes). Nonetheless, public speaking is often the only communication class students across the university may take, so its importance in this endeavor cannot be minimized. One advantage we have in making this case is that while my primary concern is equipping the students as 21st century citizens, the perspectives and skills of strong sense of rhetoric are nonetheless clearly applicable to the marketplace as well. More and more, business and industry are realizing the importance of participatory decision-making and collaborative problem solving, and the

⁶ Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1969).

⁷ See John Gastil’s *Political Communication and Deliberation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008) and John Gastil & Peter Levine, eds., *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2005) for broad reviews of public deliberation perspectives and research. Gastil is a small group communication scholar.

⁸ A few of the key articles in communication studies that inform my view are John Angus Campbell, “Oratory, democracy, and the classroom,” in *Democracy, Education, and the Schools*, ed. Roger Soder (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996); Rosa Eberly, “Rhetoric and the anti-logos doughball: Teaching deliberating bodies the practices of participatory democracy,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5 (2002), pp. 287-300; David Zarefsky, “Institutional and social goals for rhetoric,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 34, (2004), pp. 27-38; Gerard Hauser, “Teaching rhetoric. Or why rhetoric isn’t just another kind of philosophy or literary criticism,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 34 (2004), 39-53, as well as many of the chapters in McDorman and Timmerman’s recent *Rhetoric & Democracy*.

⁹ Gerard Hauser, “Rhetorical democracy and civic engagement,” in *Rhetorical democracy: Discursive practices of civic engagement*, ed. Hauser & A. Grim (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), p. 13.

need for students to be able to make judgments based on uncertain data. Thus while “good presentation skills” of the weak sense of rhetoric will remain important, the higher order skills of the strong sense are also being realized as critical to success in many arenas.

What would happen if our public speaking courses—the window into our field for thousands every year—became the focus of departments? Subgroups within communication studies all provide critical pieces for the improvement of our political culture, from argumentation scholars who help us think about the interactions between facts, values, and policies; to intercultural communication scholars that help us consider how to engage broad audiences and deal productively and morally with differences; to critical scholars that help us consider how to address issues of justice, language, and power. The public speaking classroom could truly be a laboratory for training 21st century citizens in how to engage and improve our political culture.

Small changes can also be made to the course to better connect it to the critical ideas of strong rhetoric. The course can focus on the importance of true inquiry in comparison to the simple act of seeking out information to support a previously established point of view. Students can be presented the challenges of engaging the tensions between facts, values, interests, power, and policies in a diverse democracy, and the particular challenge brought about by the politicization and overload of information. Students can be exposed to the organizations involved in the deliberative democracy movement, and understand that an alternative to purely adversarial politics exists and has a particular set of advantages and disadvantages. Students can be taught to focus on discovering the underlying tensions and tough choices inherent to public issues, and work to help others identify and work through those choices.¹⁰ Students can be taught to focus on strategies that specifically engage opposing views, and thus would require understanding that perspective from their point of view.¹¹ Thankfully, some textbooks are already starting to move in this direction (particularly textbooks tied to other participants in this colloquium).

In the end, I return to my initial assumptions. Democracy requires a high quality of communication, and we are falling significantly short. As communication teachers and scholars, we are particularly implicated in the issue, and we have clear opportunities to make an impact in our courses. I particularly believe that we must ensure that our majors are well equipped to take responsibility for the quality of the communication around them, but we must also utilize public speaking courses for this task due to their broad reach across the campus. Many factors push our politics to be overly adversarial, but our field can work as critical counter to such impulses. Our democracy needs a robust dose of the strong sense of

¹⁰ I am envisioning here a “tough choices” speech assignment, that requires the student or a group of students to examine an issue from an impartial perspective, and rather than delivering an advocacy speech to persuade, they present a deliberative speech to improve the quality of the overall discussion

¹¹ Perhaps a persuasive speech assignment that requires students to assume a generally hostile audience that would force them to avoid the tactics that work so well when preaching to the choir or the uninformed.

rhetoric, as well as people dedicated to improving the quality of our public communication, not just advancing their point of view. That task can all certainly start with our public speaking courses and our communication studies professorate.