

Eloquent Citizenship

Response to Framing Questions of The Brigrance Colloquy on Public Speaking as a Liberal Art
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Nearly everyday we read another text focused on the possibility of a rising of newly engaged citizens ready to act responsibly and effectively to make and remake the world in pursuit of the lived reality of democracy. Many of these texts are produced from national initiatives actively working to identify effective strategies, tactics, and framing concepts to support this possible rising.

The American Democracy Project was launched in 2003 by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and now involves nearly 200 universities in an explicit effort to renew the mission-based work of educating citizens in a participatory democracy. The American Democracy Project posits the assessment that higher education is failing to achieve its most precious purpose when students successfully complete their studies without learning the civic knowledge and skills necessary to efficacious citizenship. The calls to accountability for its role in sustaining and enhancing a robust democracy sounds from inside and outside academe. These calls recognize the good work that has established community engagement in the curriculum and co-curriculum of universities. College student service to community needs is an important aspect of citizenship. However, even as service learning thrives in our classrooms as a valid and effective pedagogical strategy (and struggles to find footing in faculty evaluation schemes), theorists and scholars began to notice that increased participation by students in service generated no increase in involvement in public spaces in which the structures and infrastructures of democracy are

discussed and deliberated. Students were quoted saying how much they enjoyed feeding the poor at neighborhood soup kitchens during their alternative spring breaks or summer vacations; they remarked about how good the service made them feel; they expressed (with no sense of irony) their hope that the soup kitchen would be there when they were able to return to serve again. Research clearly shows that many students who imagine themselves to be engaged with their communities are unable to articulate clear connections between public policies and social effects or their role as citizens in the discursive process of policy making or the social process of response to policy effects. Students did not understand hunger and poverty as complex socio-political conditions and experiences and could not explain the role of public policy in the production of the need for soup kitchens, which seemed to have been produced simply by the need for them. They were unable to explain the process by which public decisions are made and did not or could not see a means to act on the social conditions through public processes.

The “new” focus on educating citizens calls upon higher education to meet the challenge issued by participatory democracy. Not surprisingly, Communication faculty are intensely involved in these national projects and initiatives. Equally unsurprising is the centrality of a commitment to recognizing the foundational role of the public voice in the practice of democracy and in higher education.

Communication faculty claim rightly and easily a tradition that locates our work as an essential art of democracy. Still, we need to take seriously the charge to examine our pedagogies and consider the efficacy of our work to the 21st century democracy. Does the work in what we often name “the public speaking course” demonstrate our keen

recognition that the role of the citizen-agent requires development of civic knowledge and civic skills and both of those dimensions must include robust work in rhetoric? Do we practice in the spaces of “Communication 101” our knowledge that public communication is a pedagogical imperative for an effective democracy? Does the content of that course align theory, practice, and assessment with the sense of urgency that would seem appropriate to the mission of educating effective participants in an effective democracy? Do the learning outcomes we achieve in our public speaking courses include an understanding of the public power of human communication?

My sense is that the public speaking course functions more often in universities as a high volume site for “basic skill development.” This course is often situated in the first year of college and, at my university, will soon occupy a spot in the newly renamed “foundational studies” program. We celebrate the inclusion of public speaking in core curricula across higher education institutions as evidence of the recognition of public speaking as a crucial civic skill. Course descriptions identify good speaking as a life skill. Content usually includes assertions of the significance of the art of effective communication. Courses feature “how to” instruction and demonstration for assessment; they may review something named “the rhetorical tradition,” but not include reading classical texts. Often, the course is managed by a course coordinator and sections are taught by graduate students and part-time faculty. Communication faculty may have little knowledge of the design or outcomes of the single course required by nearly all students at their university. The “buzz” about the course rehearses its contradictory status as a “sacred cow” and a “whipping boy.” Certainly, the talk around the course includes instructors complaining about grading one more speech

outline or listening to one more shallow speech about a social issue, students complaining that the course repeats the one they completed in high school, colleagues complaining that students don't seem to learn to speak well, despite completing the requirement, and department faculty complaining about being situated as a "service" department.

I believe we could better steward public speaking as a democratic art in such courses. I believe a pedagogy that asserts the value of public speaking as civic knowledge and skill offers much to the public speaking class. I believe the space afforded allows us to engage students in questions and practices of public action as an aspect of human agency, which is profoundly communicative. Part of what I imagine is a kind of excitation of interest rooted in a restoration of the theory that informs (or should inform) the practice. We have learned that theory unconnected from practice weakens the power of theory; we need also to know that practice without theory dulls. We can expect students to learn and practice their roles as theorists and skilled actors in the public communication classroom. We can ask them to read (not only read about) Plato and Aristotle and contemporary scholars that feature the role of individual agency in the social processes of meaning-making.

We can up the ante on the actions we ask our students to perform in our public speaking classes. In the preface to the 8th edition of his public speaking textbook, Stephen Lucas writes, "Rather than dismissing the classroom as an artificial speaking situation, it needs to be treated as a real situation in which students can--and do--affect the knowledge, values, beliefs, and opinions of their classmates. This edition continues that emphasis. By doing so, I hope it will contribute to the reinvigoration of participatory democracy on campus and off." In addition to reclaiming the reality of the classroom as a space of public

communication, we can also participate in the co-curriculum and ensure the creation of spaces in which students can practice public advocacy and deliberation. We can require them to act as engaged critics of the public communication events that constitute a university co-curriculum.

We can up the ante on student communicative action as well by insisting on eloquence. The false tension between “what” and “how” in public communication persists and compels consistent challenge in our classrooms. Many of us tolerate such nonsense in general observations made in popular culture (the “slick” speaker remains a stock character in many genres and commentators continue to misuse the word “rhetoric” as descriptive of “empty speech”). The 2008 presidential campaign provided a laboratory within which to counter the form/content divide and raise our expectations. In public speaking courses we must move students toward eloquence as an aspect of the power of communication; they need to recognize themselves as articulate – able to connect sometimes complexly related ideas, issues, phenomena—clearly and soundly. They must know that they can learn to speak compellingly and that compelling speech does something in the world. They must learn that making compelling speech is a right and obligation of the active citizen of an effective democracy.