Rhetorical Education in America

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Rhetorical Education in America (A Broad Stroke Introduction)

Cheryl Glenn

By the time Harvard launched its first-year writing program in the mid-1800s, teachers and scholars of rhetoric and writing were already discussing the methods and models of rhetorical education in America.[1] If a college education were to prepare its all-male students for active participation within a citizenry, for leadership positions in the church, state, and trades, what specific skills and knowledge would equip them?

Ever since Isocrates (c. 370 BCE) argued against the Sophists, teachers have tried to define precepts of a rhetorical education that would enable students to govern knowledgeably and virtuously both their own households and the commonwealth. Centuries later, the Romans called for education that trained students for *vita activa,* the active life in the polis. Although Cicero felt that aristocrats held a rhetorical advantage, he devised a system of rhetorical education that could compensate for non-aristocratic birth and develop successful rhetors for the public sphere. Two millennia later, Walter H. Beale writes that the purpose of a rhetorical education is twofold: to cultivate both the character of the individual and the success of a culture (626). Bruce Herzberg tells us that rhetorical education is the linchpin of a participatory democracy, centering as it does at the nexus of civic virtue and public as well as academic discourse (396). Thomas P. Miller and Melody Bowdon argue that rhetorical education goes beyond the teaching of composition to inhabit civic action, whether that civic action takes the form of political debates, community literacy programs, or service learning (591). And writing about the public deliberation on war against Iraq, Chidsey Dickson describes his own rhetorical interventions as "symbolic action in the civic sphere." However broadly it might be defined, however and wherever it manifests

itself, rhetorical education perpetuates the principles of participation appropriate to a specific cultural moment.

Ideally, rhetorical education shapes all citizens for public participation, "with political deliberations, judicial negotiations of conflicts, and celebrations of public values" (Miller and Bowdon 593–94). Practically, rhetorical education has traditionally shaped only men of the upper class for leadership positions in the public sphere, for *vita activa,* usually for the advantage of those same aristocratic men even when such an advantage is at the expense of Others. In fact, the concerns of Others were not an issue until these Others made their way into the academy. The entrance of white women of every class, bourgeois and working-class men, African-American and Native American men and women, and immigrants—and their concomitant expectations of rhetorical education—threatened the status quo. Their cultural traditions, language practices, and reading and writing skills did not correspond with those endorsed by the universities, yet university curricula could not change as quickly as the student demographics. If these Others also expected to be educated for participation in the public sphere, then who would lead? Who would follow? Rhetorical education is inherently slippery—as a concept, theory, practice, or application. And questions of who should receive rhetorical education, in what form, and for what purpose, continue to vex it.

As the essays in this collection demonstrate, rhetorical education enables people to engage in and change American society—but not always. Well-born males continue to receive the very best rhetorical educations, the best preparation for participating in the public sphere (an assessment of any judicial or legislative branch of government or of the Fortune 500 business leaders will attest to that statement). If this were not the case, then female students at the Seven Sisters colleges, male and female students at historically Black and Native American colleges and universities, students at land-grant universities, deaf and hard-of-hearing students at Gallaudet University, and students educated in clubs, organizations, and cyberspace would receive the same measure of rhetorical education as those white male students at Ivy League schools. Male, female, rich, poor—students of every age, color, and physical ability—would reap the benefits of rhetorical education in this democracy we refer to as America.

But the problem of equality in rhetorical education is not in its quality so much as in its distribution, and then not so much in its distribution

as in its reception. Indeed, many of those denied formal rhetorical instruction successfully learned by other means (church, family, library, politics) to be eloquent public speakers and writers. But American society at large has not always welcomed the rhetorical productions of Others (the oratorical displays of Native Americans were systematically mistranslated, romanticized, or ignored[2]). When, despite great odds, members of traditionally marginalized groups received a measure of rhetorical education, they were often prevented from displaying their education and expertise (women, for instance, were not permitted to deliver their compositions and were discouraged from speaking publicly). When they did exhibit their rhetorical expertise, that expertise was received with suspicion. Nontraditional rhetors were sometimes ridiculed if not threatened by those who feared the potential of their suasory abilities, particularly when it disrupted traditional notions of who could behave as a citizen (many women, Blacks, and Native Americans attended college before they were granted U.S. citizenship). And when they used their rhetorical educations to assert their "inherent right and ability [. . .] to determine their own communicative needs and desires," what Scott Richard Lyons calls "rhetorical sovereignty," they were often challenged (449). In fact, when Others took the pen, stage, or pulpit, they were expected to do so as "Americans" representing the dominant culture. They were expected to have erased, as best they could, the traces of color, accent, and gender from their self-presentation. (Consider Richard Pratt's motto for the Carlisle Indian School: "Kill the Indian, Save the Man.") In other words, even though rhetorical education "attempts to shape a certain kind of character capable of using language effectively to carry on the practical and moral business of a polity," its goals circle right back to the preservation of dominant culture (Beale 626).

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste,* French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu perceptively explains the tautology, for every educational program fulfills a specific function: to legitimate social inequalities that exist before, after, inside, and outside its educational operations. The cultural tastes of dominant classes are given institutional form and then, with deft ideological sleight of hand, their taste for this institutionalized culture (i.e., their own) is held up as evidence of their cultural, and ultimately social, superiority. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (of who assumes, claims, or is awarded the right to rule, lead, speak publicly) plays out in rhetorical education, particularly in America, where different groups of students at different locations are educated differ-

ently, prepared to take—or to not take—a range of rhetorical roles in the public sphere. Bourdieu enables us to understand that, by definition, rhetorical education promotes a culture and, in doing so, works to erase those cultures, languages, and traditions that are not those of the dominant class.

The problems of inequity inherent in rhetorical education are very much with us today. Yet despite those problems, millions of students, half of whom speak a language other than English in their homes, and thousands of teachers embark every year on a course of rhetorical education. These courses reside in such diverse and overlapping settings as in first-year writing and public speaking courses, undergraduate writing programs, English as a second language programs, graduate programs housed in English or Speech Communication departments, university writing centers and writing-across-the-curriculum programs, textbooks or seminal texts (such as Caleb Bingham's 1803 *Columbian Orator*), women's clubs, parlor performances, literacy programs and movements, churches, and political programs and movements. Teachers and students in these traditional and alternative settings continue to search for ways around the obstacles and toward the opportunities rhetorical education presents.

The relationship of rhetoric to education and the ways that rhetorical awareness is developed in educational institutions still remains to be clearly and fully articulated. After all, rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment, even as it concerns itself with the audience for and purpose of literate acts, with the actual effects of discourse, and with real possibilities rather than ideal certainties. Therefore, the contributors to *Rhetorical Education in America* have converged to explore the purposes, problems, and possibilities of rhetorical education in America on both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and both inside and outside the academy.

In doing so, the contributors join with scholars who have appraised, furthered, and changed the face of rhetorical education in America.[3] Beginning with Adams Sherman Hill's late-nineteenth-century publications on the subject, the critiques of rhetorical education in America picked up momentum in the last half of the previous century, bringing to bear studies varying broadly—from Brenda Jo Brueggemann's *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness* and David Wallace Adams's *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience* to Anne Ruggles Gere's *Intimate Practices* and Jacqueline Jones

Royster's *Traces of a Stream.*[4] Thus, the contributors continue the general vein of previous scholarly work, interrogating the contested phrase itself, its equally contested applications, its history, and its accumulative accompanying critiques. Their individual essays are responses to these questions: What students have been prepared for what action? How exactly have they been trained to behave, interact, and insert themselves into the economic, academic, and social politics of America? How have they accumulated and circulated their measure of cultural capital? Collectively, then, the essays that constitute *Rhetorical Education in America* explore and interrogate the practices and functions of rhetorical education in light of the links Bourdieu and others have made between institutional policies and the maintenance of the status quo. At the same time, we intend these essays to suggest that rhetorical education, through practices such as those described by Shirley Wilson Logan and Susan Kates, can be a means of empowerment for marginalized groups that wish to disrupt the status quo.

An edited collection can contain but a slice of scholarship on a particular topic. As we worked to establish a manageable scope and suitable arrangement for this collection, we focused on the readers who, we believe, are most likely to engage it. We suspect that our primary audience will include many newcomers to the field of rhetoric and composition; thus, we have selected materials that address some of the most important questions newcomers to the field might have. Many of these questions, we discovered, are also actively discussed among seasoned scholars of rhetoric and composition, and we hope these scholars will find the collection useful as they continue to search for answers.

Two of the most obvious questions one confronts when teaching rhetoric are "Why does rhetorical education matter?" and "What can rhetorical education do?" As Shirley Wilson Logan suggests, when teachers of rhetoric introduce their students to the means of persuasion, the texts of significant rhetors, and the various communities of discourse in the academy, the professions, and the public, those teachers must also engage in "discussions of the question, 'Rhetorical education for what?' " (36). Part 1, "The Implications of Rhetorical Education," provides a historical overview of rhetorical education in America while it also asks readers to consider the effects of that education. What should rhetorical education enable? To what ends should we pursue this amorphous project called rhetorical education?

In the first essay in part 1, William Denman proposes that the proper

end for rhetorical education is the development of the citizen-orator. The ancient model of the citizen-orator, Denman explains, purposefully links rhetoric, civic life, and democracy. This model, however, declined in the face of nineteenth-century individualism, economic competition, and professionalization. The ideal of the citizen-orator, Denman contends, ought to be restored to the rhetorical curriculum today so that once again students will learn to communicate effectively in democratic life. "The ancient links between rhetoric and the development and maintenance of democracy," Denman concludes, "are too important for us to continue to ignore in our basic courses" (16). Denman's essay is suggestive of what rhetorical education might mean, and it provides a useful overview of scholarship on rhetorical education from the field of communications. We hope that this overview will encourage readers to pursue such scholarship further.

Thomas Miller also argues for a pedagogically and publicly reinvigorated model of rhetorical education within rhetoric and composition in his essay, "Lest We Go the Way of Classics: Toward a Rhetorical Future for English Departments." Miller suggests that English departments have embraced a "literary-research paradigm" that devalues the teaching of rhetorical skills for public participation. English departments, Miller continues, need to recast their purposes, to move away from literary research and instead prioritize a curriculum of "courses that combine historical analysis, institutional critique, and service learning to teach the literacies of citizenship" and assist in the development of articulate, activist citizens (34).

In the final essay of the first part, "'To Get an Education and Teach My People': Rhetoric for Social Change," Shirley Wilson Logan discusses the contexts in which nineteenth-century African Americans studied rhetoric as a means to social change. Logan suggests that, unlike those nineteenth-century students, current students do not learn to see rhetoric as a powerful force in efforts to shape human interaction and political circumstances. "I am proposing" Logan writes, "that more attention be paid in composition classrooms—and in all classrooms—to the ways in which rhetorical competence influences and enables meaning and enhances the ability to manage human affairs" (38). The traditions of rhetorical education Logan traces among nineteenth-century African Americans provide powerful examples of how enabling rhetorical competence can be.

In addition to wondering about the implications of rhetorical educa-

tion, newcomers to the field of rhetoric and composition will certainly wish to know some of the different forms that rhetorical education in America has taken throughout its rather lengthy history. Because many of our readers will encounter this collection in an academic context, part 2 explores "Rhetorical Education in Diverse Classrooms." Contributors to this section raise questions about how rhetorical education has been configured within university classrooms.

Jill Swiencicki considers rhetorical handbooks as sites where scholars, teachers, and students negotiate conflicting discourses of identity. Through a detailed study of *The Columbian Orator* in both its 1803 and 1998 editions, Swiencicki demonstrates that "artifacts such as rhetoric handbooks are places where our desires for coherent national, cultural, and political identities contend with the very differences that threaten to unravel seams of difference that are carefully stitched together" (58). Rather than simply presenting our students with contemporary textbooks, Swiencicki urges teachers of rhetorical education to use handbooks from the archives of rhetorical education. These historical texts—with the guidance of a skilled teacher—can engage students in a "critical dialogue about rhetoric, subject formation, and knowledge production—a dialogue that sees writing as action" (73).

In "Politics, Identity, and the Language of Appalachia: James Watt Raine on 'Mountain Speech and Song,'" Susan Kates invites readers to consider rhetorical education at nontraditional institutions such as Berea College, a four-year school in the Appalachian region of Kentucky. Kates explores how James Watt Raine, a professor of rhetoric at Berea in the early twentieth century, espoused the value of the Appalachian dialect in his publications and pedagogy. Raine's text, *The Land of the Saddle-bags: A Study of the Mountain People of Appalachia*, "mounts an articulate defense of the culture and, more specifically, the language of the people of the mountain region of Kentucky" (75). This defense of the Appalachian dialect, Kates suggests, is relevant to contemporary debates about the relationship between language and identity. In order to respond effectively to language-in-education controversies, such as the Ebonics debate and the English Only movement, scholars and teachers of rhetoric, Kates argues, would benefit from a "more complete portrait of local, politicized rhetorics," such as those professed by Raine at Berea (86).

Rich Lane invites readers to consider the far-reaching effects of how the academy configures rhetorical education by investigating rhetorical

instruction provided to future secondary school teachers in English-education programs. After discussing curricula from several English-education programs, Lane concludes that a great percentage of secondary language arts classrooms are entrenched in nationalistic and aesthetically driven curricula as a result of what gets taught in English-education courses. Although the typical postsecondary curriculum "has undergone extensive discussion and reevaluation" in order to strengthen its rhetorical perspective, language-arts curricula remain focused on "canonical literature and literary analysis" (87). In response to this disjunction, Lane argues that English-education programs need to be infused with a more rhetorically based curriculum—a curriculum that might benefit future secondary school teachers and, in turn, their students.

With many of the essays in parts 1 and 2 suggesting that rhetorical education has effects that reach far beyond the academy, we suspect that our readers will also want to know more about how rhetorical education has functioned outside of official academic contexts. The essays in part 3 demonstrate that rhetorical education has never been limited to the classroom. Nan Johnson's essay, "Parlor Rhetoric and the Performance of Gender in Postbellum America," explores the important cultural work performed by the parlor rhetoric movement in the nineteenth century. This movement, she elaborates, "promised to put the skills of rhetorical influence into the hands of every American citizen who could read and could pay the price of an elocution or letter-writing manual" (107). Yet this promise, she explains, was heavily mediated by assumptions about gender and class. Despite its promises, the parlor rhetoric movement "reinscribed not the example of women's rhetorical advances into public life but rather a highly conservative construction of the American woman as a mother and wife who needed rhetorical skills only to perform those roles to greater effect" (107–08).

Through a detailed study of the Saratoga National Historical Park, S. Michael Halloran reminds us that rhetorical education need not come through textbooks or academically authorized teachers. Historical landmarks provide rhetorical education by instructing visitors about how to perceive and respond to historical artifacts. By creating a sense of shared identity among visitors, educational materials at such landmarks enable diverse individuals to engage in the rhetorical activities of shared public discourse. Through visits to landmarks such as the Saratoga battlefield, diverse groups of people come to share certain historical knowledge and national perspectives and become part of a discourse community of citizens. "These are sites of rhetorical education," Halloran asserts, "and

the study of how [such historical sites] work to inform their visitors, and hence to form those visitors as citizens is a vast, inviting, largely unexplored, and deeply important field for rhetorical research" (144).

In an essay that serves as a companion piece to Halloran's, Gregory Clark studies "an instance of rhetorical education in America that is cultural rather than curricular" (145). Clark demonstrates how landscapes, particularly those mediated by institutions of national culture such as the National Parks Service, provide rhetorical education to a wide swath of the American public. Clark argues that when Americans gather in a landscape that has been rendered publicly symbolic of their nation, they are schooled in the experience of a common national identity—a fundamental part of American rhetorical education. This education in collective identity and national culture, Clark suggests, forms a basis for future instruction in theories and practices of public discourse.

Part 4 invites readers to discuss the past of rhetorical education in light of its future. More specifically, "Rhetorical Education: Back to the Future" encourages readers to consider how they might make use today of the information this collection provides about the different sites and purpose that have characterized rhetorical education in America. Given contemporary rhetorical situations, what can we learn from what we've done in the past? Which past pedagogical practices might we revive? Which current practices might we keep? What new practices must we develop?

In "(Re)Turning to Aristotle: Metaphor and the Rhetorical Education of Students," Sherry Booth and Susan Frisbie trace scholarly thinking about metaphor from Aristotle to Kenneth Burke and suggest that, by investigating the narratives buried within metaphors, teachers of rhetoric and composition can lead students to a richer understanding of how language shapes reality. Contemporary composition handbooks, Booth and Frisbie explain, present "a simplistic view [of metaphor] that urges teachers to help students avoid mixed or strained metaphors but does not address the role of metaphor in conveying and receiving—in constructing—meaning" (164). Yet the concept of metaphor, Booth and Frisbie contend, has a much richer history, one that considers metaphor "as a means to provide a new perspective or to persuade" and as a rhetorical strategy that "links language and psychology and spans the spectrum of human endeavor and inquiry" (177). Contemporary rhetorical education might draw on this history and enrich students' understandings of how language persuades.

The final essay in part 4, Laura Gurak's "Cyberliteracy: Toward a New

Rhetorical Consciousness," points to vast new territories for rhetorical education. Gurak traces historical configurations of literacy and suggests that the concept of literacy, as it informs the teaching of rhetoric, "must be reconfigured if it is to be a useful heuristic and critical tool for the sorts of discourse that will take place in the future" (180). The rhetorical curriculum of the twenty-first century, Gurak argues, will need to focus on the development of critical "cyberliteracy." After elaborating the promises and dangers of internet technology for rhetorical education, Gurak calls for a curriculum that helps students understand and critically evaluate the rhetorical features of digital communication.

As with all textual divisions, the "parts" of *Rhetorical Education in America* are rhetorical choices, and we intend them to highlight certain connections and conflicts among the essays. Other connections and conflicts will undoubtedly emerge for the reader across, and perhaps in resistance to, the divisions we have established. We hope that, in the end, readers come away from this collection not with all of their questions about rhetorical education in America answered, but with a desire to contribute to the unsettled yet vital conversations that surround the topic.

Notes

1. By *America,* Margaret Lyday, Wendy Sharer, and I mean the United States of America. I wish to thank the other editors and Jessica Enoch, in particular, for their helpful comments on drafts of this introduction.

2. Malea Powell's scholarship on Native American oratory and writing provides keen insights into this problem.

3. Scholarship on historical definitions of literacy and historical developments of higher education abounds, some of the best being Harvey J. Graff's *The Legacies of Literacy* and *The Labyrinths of Literacy* as well as Bernard Bailyn's *Education in the Forming of American Society* and Karl Kaestle's *Pillars of the Republic.*

4. The scholarly contributions of John Brereton, Richard Bullock and John Trimbur, Robert Connors, Sharon Crowley, Keith Gilyard, Joseph Harris, Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe, Susan Miller, Thomas Miller, Steven North, Robert Scholes, and Victor Villanueva—to mention a few others and omit far too many—constitute a body of research and reflection on the problems and solutions presented by rhetorical education in America.

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The Implications of Rhetorical Education