
6.1: Rhetorical Publics

Rhetorical Publics: Beyond Clarity and Efficiency

Phyllis Mentzell Ryder

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Clarity is a means of subjection, a quality both of official, taught language and of correct writing, two old mates of power: together they flower, vertically, to impose an order. Let us not forget that writers who advocate the instrumentality of language are often those who cannot or choose not to see the suchness of things—a language as language—and therefore, continue to preach conformity to the norms of well-behaved writing; principles of composition, style, genre, correction, and improvement. To write ‘clearly’ one must incessantly prune, eliminate, forbid, purge, purify.

--Trinh Minh-Ha

In *Easy Writer*, a pocket reference similar to handbooks used in many composition courses, Andrea Lunsford asserts, “In the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, many audiences expect a writer to get to the point as directly as possible and to articulate that point efficiently and unambiguously” (139). She points out that this expectation—one which, it is fair to say, is often attributed to “good” public writing in America—is not shared by other cultures, and cautions her readers to think carefully about their readers’ expectations. Throughout the small text, she includes thoughtful advice for multilingual writers about the nuances and quirks of American writing.

What I like about Lunsford’s textbooks is her attention to moments like these, where she situates common expectations within a broader context. At the same time, I find myself questioning the assertion that American writers are all about efficiency and directness. This move is the method by which a particular American public asserts itself as “the public.” To be an American, the move argues, is to be part of a group that is most comfortable speaking directly and for whom the ideal relationship among citizens is one of efficiency. While I agree that many Americans sit comfortably with that vision of themselves, the move affirms this as the very nature of a single, unified American public—that *all* citizens, when they seek to make change in democracy, come into the same conceptual space and agree to use the same set of rhetorical conventions as they negotiate and engage with each other. The move doesn’t accurately describe the full range of rhetorical interactions within American democracy, where multiple publics struggle and vie to be accepted, however briefly, as “the” public; one in which publics are solidified through various rhetorical conventions that affirm their (differing) beliefs about the ideal relationships among citizens.

When we teach students to consider public writing in terms of a unified public sphere, we lose the opportunity to examine the ideologies inherent in the structures of public discourses—both the dominant discourse and others. And, we lose an opportunity to investigate how publics work with and against each other’s discourse conventions as they struggle for recognition and power in the democratic framework. I propose pedagogy that teaches students to practice the rhetorical moves of creating, entering, and challenging (multiple) publics.

Moving From “Multiple Perspectives to Multiple Publics

In “Encouraging Civic Participation among First-Year Writing Students; or Why Composition Class Should be More Like a Bowling Team?” Elizabeth Ervin notes that composition professors (and the textbooks they use) would prepare students for public life by teaching them to negotiate a range of perspectives on a particular issue. And while I agree that we must teach a critical analysis of public issues, I share Ervin’s concern that this mode of teaching does not go far enough. When we suggest that gaining “a new way of looking at the world” is a “civic activity,” Ervin writes, we “might convey tacit support for a voyeuristic relationship between students and their world, in which reading, analyzing, discussing, and writing in composition class are equivalent to intervening, acting, and participating in the ‘real world’” (385).

A voyeuristic approach to citizenship suggests that the role of citizens is to sit back and analyze the conversations around them; it suggests that democracy consists of pockets of people who do this, gathering in

their living rooms or bars or coffee houses to analyze. It doesn't offer a picture of what to do with all that analysis—how to move from the conversation with friends to conversations with strangers, or how to move from conversations to action. Rather, it relies on a rather anemic vision of representative democracy, where citizens debate about issues and then leave it to others to do anything about it. Ervin and others have taken on the task of designing pedagogy that would challenge students to move beyond analysis and towards democratic action, taking their reasoned conclusions and pressuring political or corporate entities to change (or reinforce) policy.

As composition faculty encourage the transition from voyeuristic classroom discussion towards more public-oriented speech and action, we must consider what we convey about the nature of "public discourse." It is tempting to teach one kind of public discourse as *the* model: the critical and respectful interrogation of multiple positions heavily focused on rational analysis, a mode that parallels the kind of discourse we demand in our classrooms. This ideology of the public sphere has a long history, as Michael Warner explains [According to] the dominant ideology of the public sphere, dating at least from the early eighteenth century, . . . the public sphere is simply people making use of their reason. Citizens, in this commonsense view, form opinions in dialogue with each other and that is where public opinion comes from. Any address to a public tends to be understood and imitating face-to-face argumentative dialogue, or rather an idealized version of such dialogue. . . . One proceeds by airing different views in the interest of understanding, making assumptions explicit, and then reaching some decision. The public sphere is critical discussion writ large. (143)

Indeed, the assertion that the best public discourse is an intellectual exchange of clarity and reason is asserted over and over. Cries over the apparent demise of such public discourse are the central thrust of a great number of popular books these days: the premise underlies Deborah Tannen's *The Argument Culture*, and, in its own satirical way, Al Franken's *Lies and the Lying Liars who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*. More recently, it's been taken up by Robert Reich in *Reason*, and in Al Gore's *Assault on Reason*. On the right, we see it in the marketing of the Fox Network as "Fair and Balanced."

But how much does the critical-rational discourse model map onto actual public discourse? As we can see by the barrage of books out there, the conventions of ideal public discourse are not settled. Proponents of the critical-rational mode argue that such a discourse is the foundation of democracy and that, without it, democracy is doomed to crumble. In the process, however, they uphold the false ideal that such discourse conventions used to be (and should be once again) practiced universally among all citizens. They presume that when discussing public issues, citizens will speak the same way whether they are urban or rural, from the north or south, black or white, gay or straight. They presume that one could enter into a public conversation using the same discourse conventions, no matter the location of that conversation—whether in a church basement or a gay-rights fundraising banquet or a university faculty meeting. Surely, the content would change, and the kinds of evidence or appeals might change, but the presumption is that, if the public is behaving properly, the discourse will proceed according to the rules of rational, critical exchange. Deviation from such conventions would be taken as a sign that the group is not really acting as "a public" but as something else—a private conversation, perhaps, or a group not oriented to public work.

Yet a public is a site in which struggles over how we will relate get worked out, and within these struggles, one public will dismiss or exclude another as "not appropriate for public space" precisely as a way to assert their own discursive worldview, their own belief about how strangers should interact. Publics that do not privilege efficiency or individualism, for example, will use different rhetorical moves, building to a point indirectly through stories, perhaps, or spending more time establishing a mutual relationship between speakers.

If the clash in public interactions includes a fundamental clash about how we see the world, what is good, and how we know all this, then the usual advice to employ rational, analytical discourse seems to miss the point. I'd venture that within heated public exchanges, many rhetors feel the larger conflict: that of the worldviews that are embedded in the discourse conventions of those publics. The "conversations" arrive at impasse not because of a lack of rationality, but because the focus on rationality ignores the deeper levels of the conflict—disagreements about how to relate to each other, the purpose of discussion, the way the world works, who counts as a "citizen"; disagreements about whether the mode of operation should be based efficiency and pragmatism or longer, more complex relationships. The "nonstandard" discourse conventions mark other ideologies, classes, and social divisions. Rather than address these more fundamental challenges, a rhetor may make a strategic move of focusing on the ways that the discourse has fallen short of particular conventions, conventions that are asserted as universal and vital to democratic deliberation. With such a move, the rhetor shuts down the more fundamental challenges of the exchange.

Through discourse conventions, rhetors hail their audiences; their rhetorical conventions posit a worldview

that is then confirmed when the audience accepts it and responds. Warner puts it nicely, Public discourse says not only “Let a public exist,” but “Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.” It then goes in search of confirmation that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success—success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world understanding it articulates. Run it up the flagpole and see who salutes. Put on a show and see who shows up. (114)

Considering public writing as that which brings people together, even momentarily, in a “salute” to the character, conventions, worldview that has been articulated in that writing, means that we must see public writing as oriented towards people. That is, public writing is not only about writing letters to government representatives or to corporate entities; rather, it is about bringing together strangers who will “cite, circulate, and realize the world understanding” in the writing. Rather than orient only towards the critical-rational discourse as “the” central discourse of democracy, we must look for the multiple discourses that bring people together, and we must consider the many ways that publics are constituted. Moreover, we need to teach ourselves and our students how practice the art of public-making.

Rhetorical Dimensions of Publics: Two Models

Philosopher Benjamin Barber decries the current liberal, representative democracy as a “thin democracy” and proposes instead that citizens work together towards a more participatory democracy, a “strong democracy.” In his vision, more people would be part of public agenda setting at both national and local levels, and citizens would learn better skills for forming empathetic and mutual relationships. He wants American democracy to move beyond a liberal individualism, in which the role of citizens is to be a “watchdog” and protect any infringement on their own rights and properties. Rather, he proposes a democracy in which groups of strangers work together to create change and meet each other’s needs.

As part of his proposal for a strong democracy, Barber outlines nine rhetorical abilities that citizens would need to develop: 1) the articulation of interests; bargaining and exchange; 2) persuasion; 3) agenda-setting; 4) exploring mutuality; 5) maintaining autonomy; 6) affiliation and affection; 7) witness and self expression; 8) reformulation and re-conception; 9) community-building as the creation of public interest, common goods, and active citizens. (178-198) Barber considers the first two categories as foundational in a liberal, representative democracy; while he sees them as necessary here, he does not consider them sufficient. In addition, citizens need the skills of agenda setting—the ability to define a particular issue as a problem worthy of public discussion, and the ability to prioritize issues for the discussion. We can see this at work when a community organization pressures a public official to meet and does not relinquish the agenda. With function eight—reformulation and reconception—citizens learn that agenda-setting is an on-going process through which they assess their priorities along with their key values and terms.

Several items on Barber’s list are critical to developing as sense of a public as a site where strangers meet to develop and solidify a relationship with each other. For example, in “Exploring mutuality,” Barber insists on the value of conversation for its own sake, a process through which citizens meet and learn about each other, without presuming any a priori independent groups and in which they are able to fix their own rules of conduct as they go. Any move towards efficiency, here, would get in the way of the larger goal of generating new understanding. Function six—affiliation and affection—are poetic moves and rituals that establish and affirm the emotional relationships among citizens. All the discursive moves help create the category of “artificial friend, . . . whose kinship is a contrivance of politics rather than natural or personal or private” (189).

As a pedagogical tool, Barber’s list of the rhetorics of strong public life suggests that students might analyze the work of publics—such as community organizations, or social movements—to determine when and how they engage in these moves. When does the public find strategic moments for exploring mutuality, for example? Who is brought together for that interaction and what context is necessary for it to happen? How does the organization provide for its members models of conversational talk that allow multiple perspectives and ambiguity even as it consolidates the group as a group, providing a sense for their common contexts and a sense of “we”? Does the group create opportunities for members to assert their autonomy and “leave room for the expression of distrust, dissent, or just plain opposition” (a feature of function seven)? Barber argues that the opportunity for dissent is essential as a method for assuring that when people do agree with the larger action of the group, they do so not out of coercion but out of conviction.

To make Barber’s list of rhetorical functions more helpful, though, I have portrayed them here in terms of the rhetorics of publics—plural—and how each forms and sustains itself. Within Barber’s larger book, he simultaneously acknowledges the multiplicity of positions and experiences among citizens and citizen groups, yet

he remains drawn to the ideal of a more unified, single public. As a result, in his analysis of the function of “exploring mutuality,” for example, he makes a case for a kind of public conversation that ignores the power dynamics inherent in any society: constraints of hegemonic power, historical relationships of power, and so on. He writes that in true democratic talk “no voice is privileged, no position advantaged, no authority other than the process itself acknowledged. Every expression is both legitimate and provisional, a proximate and temporary position of a consciousness in evolution” (183).

Barber’s claim here is akin to the ideal that Jürgen Habermas laid out in his foundational *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere*—the idea that the public sphere is automatically inclusive and that people who enter that space leave identity and status markers outside and can, therefore, negotiate and deliberate as equals. Both authors also presume that the space of deliberation is outside the space of action. And yet, if a public is constituted by its discourse—and if its discourse is constituted by its worldview—then the space of deliberation *is* the space of action. If I “try out” another way of speaking, I signal my willingness to enter into and circulate a new kind of discourse and, therefore, a new public. If I acknowledge and interact with a discourse that is inherently homophobic, for example, my use of that language is neither neutral nor innocent, and it can maintain the vitality of a public that I find abhorrent. Barber’s review of the rhetorical functions in democratic practice needs to be bolstered by a more complex way of understanding the clashes and power dynamics among publics.

Michael Warner addresses some of these limitations in *Public and Counterpublics*. While for Barber, citizens *use* discourse for public means, for Warner, citizens who come together in publics are *constituted* by their discourse. Whereas Barber yearns for a place where all can gather and develop mutual relationships outside of historical power and pressure, Warner sees greater possibility in imagining public space as the location of constant clash and struggle, where multiple publics contend internally to maintain their own identity and contend with each other to assert their discursive worldview more broadly. He writes, “There is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation” (114).

When we conceptualize public writing as the act of trying to find affirmation for the world we see and for our way of being in that world, then the question of “public writing” moves away from the kind of exhortation that Lunsford offered—away from the question of how to anticipate what “the public” expects in order to meet that expectation. Instead, it puts a greater responsibility on the writer to make sure that his or her performance matches with the public relationships he or she wishes to invoke. At the same time, knowing that the rational-critical mode that has been institutionalized (through writing teachers, government conventions and the like) as *the* mode of public discourse, means that we must be particularly careful about those rhetorical moves that would shut publics out of the larger conversation because they don’t conform to this ideal.

Warner also notes that “a public is a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse” (90). “No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time” (90). Texts that seem to have been pivotal in mobilizing people to action succeed because the way has been paved for people to take up the discourse at that moment. To write—or speak, or blog—for change, then, demands that one work within a broader public, that one work within a system through which the discourse can circulate. In this sense public writing is always intertextual. Warner writes, “It’s the way texts circulate, and become the basis for further representations, that convinces us that publics have activity and duration. A text, to have a public, must continue to circulate through time, and because this can only be confirmed through an intertextual environment of citation and implication, all publics are intertextual, even intergeneric.” (97)

As David Bartholomae and Joseph Harris have long argued that academics are inherently intertextual creatures, so Warner argues that the publics, too, are constituted by the circulation of texts. As composition teachers, then, we can trace the textual legacies through historical and contemporary public(s) writing, and we can help our students strategize about the ways that they can build on and against the textual histories that constitute the publics they seek to advance.

A Pedagogy of Public Writing

A pedagogy of public writing demands that teachers and students recognize “the public” as a site of struggle. We can investigate “public writing” by exploring the discursive clashes among publics, paying particular attention to the various rhetorical dimensions of that discourse—how it situates citizens in relation to each other, how it positions members of different publics in relation to each other, and what worldview it offers. Furthermore, we must trace the circulation of their (multiple) texts to see how those texts reaffirm the vitality of the public as well as how they borrow or resist the discourses of other publics around them. We might consider how the public employs the rhetorical strategies that Barber lays out—agenda setting, exploring mutuality, affirming affiliation and affect—as well as those that Warner points us to—the public as poetic world-making, the public as speech directed to both intimates and strangers.

Although part of a public writing course may be devoted to analysis and study of the concept of publics and public writing, stopping there does not take us much beyond the voyeuristic democracy that Ervin warns us against. I recommend that students work closely with and for community organizations as they explore and study public rhetorics. As they do so, they may write analytical papers *about* who the organization forges its connections with others. Moreover, I recommend that by the end of the semester, students should be required to write *for* and *with* the organization with whom they have partnered. An overview of my students’ work with a local DC non-profit can illustrate how such partnerships can provide students with opportunities to practice public-making.

A many-faceted program, CentroNía’s mission is to educate children and strengthen families in a bilingual, multicultural community. Begun as an attempt to revitalize a local church childcare program, it has evolved in response to a perceived on-going need to support multilingual communities in the broader D.C. area. CentroNía is headquartered in the Columbia Heights neighborhood where the population in 2000 was 31.7% white, 45.7% African American, and 24.7% Hispanic/Latino (DC Office of Planning). CentroNía has a multilingual daycare center, a DC Bilingual Public Charter School, professional and vocational training for adults and a center for family and community development.

Several of my student volunteered with CentroNía by working closely with the Communications Manager. She designated a variety of writing and research tasks for them: some were research reports to educate CentroNía staff about best practices in multilingual education or nonprofit, multicultural management; these would be distributed internally. Others were public relations pieces about various facets of the program; these would be published in the newsletter or could be used in funding raising reports.

In my course, students were required to study CentroNía’s website, pamphlets, annual report, and other documents to become familiar with its discourse. They compared these to government documents (such as census data), news reports, and DC cultural tourism documents. The goal in this analysis was to help them recognize how the discourse conveyed particular worldviews. In some ways, this was obvious: CentroNía publishes its documents in both Spanish and English. In other ways, the distinctions required close readings and awareness of some of the trends in community organizing. For example, the CentroNía materials highlight community assets; they refrain from characterizing community members as lacking or in need; rather they highlight the abilities they offer and the possibilities to which they aspire. This move is more than a public-relations strategy (though it is that); rather, it coincides with a particular philosophy of community and grassroots organizing that emphasizes capacity to help build a public (see, for example, the chapter on asset mapping by John Kretzmann and John McKnight).

Writing about an organization and writing with and for that organization demand that students pay close attention to such rhetorical indicators of worldviews. One student, who had presented her detailed analysis of CentroNía’s bilingual educational philosophy at a student conference earlier in the semester, remarked that she was struck by the challenge of writing a newsletter article using the voice of the organization. She recognized that she would need to embody the worldview that she has just analyzed; furthermore, she recognized that for her piece to be successful, it would need to convey the ethos of the organization, to continue its public-making function. For her final project, she interviewed faculty, parents, and students in CentroNía’s Pre-K program, selected a specific anecdote about a four year old who added Spanish to her already fluent Russian and English after a year in the program, and wove in information about how CentroNía’s program has been chosen by the DC government as a model for PreK education. At the same time, she gained a greater awareness of the multiple and divergent audiences that are always part of such public writing—the families who participate in CentroNía, and the families who have not yet become part of it; the current funding organizations and the potential future ones;

the employees and the managers; the long-time volunteers and the brand new ones. Although the newsletter article is just a small piece of the extensive and multi-faceted methods CentroNia uses to create and reinforce its public, the project required the student to wrestle with many of the components of public-making—her process and final project evidenced rhetorics of mutuality, affiliation and affection, and an orientation towards those strangers who might “show up and salute.”

Ultimately, we can teach our students to seek out new opportunities employ public discourses that capture the vision they wish to promote, and we can practice the powerful moves of asserting the values and vitality of our many public lives.

Unlike the pedagogy that Ervin decries, this mode of looking at public writing moves students beyond the voyeuristic role of considering multiple “perspectives.” This pedagogy challenges the primacy of the discourse of single public sphere, one too often invested in the twins of neo-liberalism, efficiency and individualism. Instead, a pedagogy of public writing invites students into the clash of publics—the clash of worldviews and rhetorics—and asks them to negotiate their way into new discursive spaces.

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