

Teaching Argument, Courageously

During the 20 years that I served as Dean of Students and then Dean of the University, I encouraged incoming students every Fall, at the matriculation ceremony that launches Puget Sound's academic year, to find and develop their authentic, personal voices. I hope that their liberal arts college experience will support their abilities to express the ideas about which they feel passionate, to seek out opportunities to test their voices, and to have the courage to learn in conversations that may be uncomfortable. Educator Parker Palmer, in his book *The Courage to Teach* (John Wiley and Sons, 1998), notes that "students who have been well served by good teachers may walk away angry – angry that their prejudices have been challenged and their sense of self shaken. That sort of dissatisfaction may be a sign that real education happened." Across the nation we have experienced in recent years multiple examples of students and teachers, and students-as-teachers, taking up the challenges of speaking passionately and courageously about issues of diversity and inclusion, income equity, climate change, immigration, and other social justice concerns. Indeed, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 11, 2016) characterized that year's incoming class as the most likely set of students in the past 50 years to participate in student-led protest; subsequent entering classes have been no less motivated.

For such courageous teaching and learning to be most effective, we need to attend to what rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer, writing in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* in 1968 – a time of significant protest, disruption, and change – called "the rhetorical situation." Based on examination of the exigence that calls speech into existence, the audience to whom the discourse will be directed, and the constraints existing in the situation, rhetors can craft discourse that most effectively fits its rhetorical situation. Within this frame, we can consider the value of four types of courageous rhetoric.

The rhetoric of demand. In 2016, in the midst of student activism, a national collaborative project *thedemands.org* affirmed that "students have risen up to demand an end to systemic and structural racism on campus." In response to exigences in which persons feel unheard, demands draw attention; they create a sense of solidarity across time and geography. Demands can create a sense of urgency, but they do not express priority. Further, demands are incomplete arguments. Standing alone, they are claims without evidence and without the motivational links between evidence and claim that accomplish persuasion of the audiences to whom they are directed. Demands expressed without relative priority ignore the constraints of a rhetorical situation, or reject constraints outright by labeling them "status quo." Sustainable change in the academy and in our larger democratic political system proceeds by persuasive argument, not by declaration, command, or compulsion. Demands are a scream, a scream we need to hear, but the rhetoric of demand does not sustain.

The rhetoric of narrative. In some instances, student protest leaders have combined demands with narratives, stories of personal experience that make vivid problematic conditions. Narrative is the basis of empathy, what Martha Nussbaum in *Cultivating Humanity* (Harvard University Press, 1997) describes as "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have." There was a public "empathy flap" around Justice Sandra Sotomayor's appointment to the Supreme Court; I recommend to you her 2001 Berkeley address (*Berkeley La Raza Law Journal*, Spring 2002;

republished in *The New York Times*, May 14, 2009) in which she explained that “to understand takes time and effort, something that not all people are willing to give. For others, their experiences limit their ability to understand the experiences of others. Others simply do not care. Hence, one must accept the proposition that a difference there will be by the presence of women and people of color on the bench. Personal experiences affect the facts that judges choose to see.”

We are all judges in our daily decisions, on campus and across many dimensions of our lives. Narrative evidence needs to be valued in our argumentation, and not dismissed as merely emotional or non-rational. Narrative evidence gives voice to those historically unheard. It *has* a rationality: when it passes the tests of coherence and fidelity, it is powerful (Walter R. Fisher, *Communication Monographs*, 1985). For example, Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his award-winning book *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel and Grau, 2015), writes about ever-present fear held by young black men. Faculty, staff, and student voices have spoken the fears and exclusions they experience on majority white campuses. Courageous and bold narrative can be a powerful and sustaining component of the work of inclusion needed on, and beyond, college campuses.

The rhetoric of deliberation. The fundamental goal of a liberal arts education is to prepare for deliberation across a lifetime of decision-making. We educate advocates who understand that argumentation is a humane activity which tests ideas one against another. In contrast to contemporary televised celebrations of *ad hominem* fallacy or personal attack, mislabeled as political debate, well-prepared deliberative advocates understand that arguers respect people who hold different points of view, even as they advocate for a preferred outcome. Deliberation, based in strong argumentation, is a sustainable means to accomplish change.

Campuses can continue to be, and become even more crucial, powerful sites for deliberation on significant questions that results in action. At the University of Puget Sound, for example, civic scholarship has brought the intellectual assets of the campus into mutual and reciprocal partnership with the intellectual assets of our city and region to reduce homeless, coordinate response to environmental challenges, bring higher education to incarcerated women, and – through the flagship Race and Pedagogy Institute – address educational achievement and systemic racism in K-12 and higher education. Effective deliberation depends upon analysis of audience, criteria for weighing priorities and trade-offs, and feasible proposals. Further, deliberation needs to keep moving; urgent issues cannot afford the academy’s traditional, privileged leisure of debating things to death any more than the nation can afford legislative gridlock. Our deliberative argumentation must be well-prepared, fair, and responsive in order to sustain the work of social justice on all levels.

The rhetoric of dissent. When we deliberate, the course of action decided upon in a given instance does not always go our way. The rhetoric of dissent allows for argumentation toward a future time when changes in exigence, audience, or constraints allow for reconsideration of the issue. Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes is often quoted to affirm that “a dissent in a court of last resort is an appeal to the brooding spirit of the law, to the intelligence of a future day, when a later decision may possibly correct the error into which the dissenting judge believes the court to have been betrayed.”

For example, environmental historian and 1995 Puget Sound graduate Adam Sowards' study, referenced in Melvin Urofsky's *Dissent and the Supreme Court* (Pantheon, 2015), demonstrates that Justice William O. Douglas's dissent in the 1972 *Sierra Club v. Morton* case, along with non-judicial writings, helped create the modern environmental movement. And, as we are reminded in Betsy West and Julie Cohen's documentary "RBG" – notably the bond between Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the late Justice Antonin Scalia – those who dissent strongly can be both respectful and respected colleagues, as well as good friends. Students benefit from coming to know that clashes of ideas, argued humanely, do not need to result in breaks of relationship.

We must continue to encourage students to find and use their own personal voices on issues about which they feel passionate. We can also teach them about the relative effectiveness and sustainability of different forms of rhetorical discourse: that demands may scream, but they do not sustain; that narrative can be a powerful form of evidence and source of empathy, if it meets the standards of probability and fidelity; that deliberative argumentation will have longer-term effectiveness with audiences than command or coercion; and – as things will not all immediately go our way – the rhetoric of dissent enables us to speak constructively to a future day. Such courageous teaching and learning is at the heart of our educational mission of preparing students to participate in the highest tests of democratic citizenship.

Kristine Bartanen is former provost and professor of communication studies at University of Puget Sound, Tacoma WA. (May 8, 2020)



Center for Speech
and Effective Advocacy