

# A rhetorical education for uncivil times

## Inquiry's role in teaching argument

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This article focuses on the role of inquiry in rhetorical education. It considers the critical importance of teaching students to craft compelling questions that function to propel and shape their thinking, writing, and eventually their arguments. It also explores how inquiry allows for a moment of hesitation and reflection in the rhetoric classroom so that students do not feel rushed to make an argument without first asking thoughtful questions and pursuing answers they may not have anticipated.

Keywords: inquiry, rhetorical education, civility, civic engagement.

It is not an exaggeration to characterize the history of rhetoric as a twenty-four-hundred-year reflection on citizen education.

Arthur Walzer, "Teaching 'Political Wisdom'"

The opening epigraph asserts a claim regarding rhetoric and rhetorical education that few teachers and scholars in rhetorical studies would challenge: rhetorical practice and pedagogy has, from its inception in ancient Greece until now, had a deep and abiding relationship with citizen education and civic engagement. But a series of questions likely follows this statement: What does it mean to teach and learn rhetoric so that students become good citizens and participate effectively in public debate? How do teachers compose a rhetorical education for our students? What does this pedagogical program look like?

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To begin to explore these questions, it is critical to understand that rhetorical education is itself rhetorical. It responds to the exigencies of the current situation, and it works to meet the opportunities and the demands of the moment. Teachers, thus, need to assess their socio-political context and compose rhetorical educations for students that prepare them to engage the worlds in which they live. In this essay, I consider how I, as director of a large U.S.-based writing program at the University of Maryland, along with my administrative team, have worked to craft a rhetorical curriculum that speaks to the context of our time. Here, I discuss how the rhetoric program at my institution has come to anchor itself in the rhetorical project of inquiry. My work in this essay is to define and discuss what a rhetorical education invested in inquiry looks like. I begin by explaining why we decided to create this emphasis in our rhetorical education and why inquiry seems like an effective and necessary pedagogical strategy for these times.

In the socio-political moment in which my students find themselves in the United States, rhetorical culture is marked by two saddening characteristics: (1) incivility towards other citizens and (2) retreat from public discussion. One 2016 survey of over 1,000 Americans reveals that United States as a “major civility problem” (Weber 2106, p. 2). Seventy-five percent of respondents claim that “incivility . . . has risen to ‘crisis’ levels,” while 84 % of this group admitted that they personally had experienced incivility (p. 4). These findings are hardly surprising. The president of the United States leads by example or, one might say, tweets, and the Twitter storm he regularly produces contributes to and sustains our current state of affairs. Rhetorician Brian Ott has analyzed Trump’s social media rhetoric, explaining that, through his use of Twitter, he relies on “simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility” (Ott 2016, p. 60). Using just 140 characters, Trump catalyzes and contributes to a public discourse that is “impolite, insulting, [and] otherwise offensive” (p. 62) not to mention “sexis[t], racis[t], homophobi[c], and xenophobi[c]” (p. 64). Ott rightly portends that “[p]ublic discourse simply cannot descend into the politics of division and degradation on a daily basis without significant consequence” (p. 65).

When faced with the possibility of participating within this dominant rhetorical context, people often either launch their own uncivil, shallow attacks, or they retreat from public discourse all together. To the latter point, as Ott and others have observed, now more than ever, people *avoid* engaging with those who hold different values and beliefs, rarely considering multiple viewpoints. Instead, as Ott explains, people prefer to talk only with those with whom they agree, and the result is the creation of “ideological silos” in which “people .

. . . are being fed a steady diet of [only] what they want to hear” (Ott 2017, p. 65). In assessing this dire situation, everyday concerned citizens are turning to educators and calling for change. Indeed, one 2016 article in a leading U.S. journal makes the claim that there is a “flaw with[in] civic education, especially in the main institution charged with delivering it: public schools. Put simply, schools in the United States don’t teach the country’s future citizens how to engage respectfully across their political differences. So it shouldn’t be surprising that they can’t or that that they don’t” (Zimmerman 2016). Scholar-teachers of rhetoric would likely offer a rejoinder to such a statement. Seconding Walzer, figures such as John Duffy and Craig Rood point to rhetorical instruction as a kind of pedagogy that does or, at least, should address the incivility that marks today’s public discourse and civic culture. Rood in particular argues for rhetorical pedagogies that prompt students to practice “rhetorical civility,” and he highlights the urgency for this pedagogy, asserting that rhetoric instructors must craft their teaching towards such ends, for if their students do not learn to “listen to others, consider differences, and ‘deliberate in good faith,’ the problems of the twenty-first century will only worsen” (Rood 2014, p. 396).

As the director of the Academic Writing Program at the University of Maryland, I have been working with my administrative team to craft a rhetorical education that speaks with these scholar-teachers and to the current sociopolitical context. More particularly, I direct English 101: Academic Writing, a writing course that almost all first-year students at my institution take as part of the Fundamental Studies requirement within the General Education program. In terms of this first-year writing requirement, over 60 instructors teach approximately 130 sections of this course, which means that almost 1200 students move through the Academic Writing course per academic semester. As director, I work with my team to support our faculty by composing a standard syllabus for instructors to follow, creating an annotated syllabus replete with day plans and activities for class sessions throughout the semester, and planning professional development opportunities for instructors to deepen their expertise in rhetorical pedagogies. The goal for my team in recent years has been to craft a course in which our instructors offer students a rhetorical education in which they move *beyond* uncivil debate and retreat. Instead of prompting students to rush to simplistic, debasing argument or retreat to ideological silos, the assignment sequence within our syllabus begins with and dedicates a great deal of time to *inquiry*. Its guiding premise is that by gaining practice in the rhetorical work of inquiry, students learn to hesitate, think, reflect, and listen *before* forming

their positions. Ultimately, students engage in this inquiry with the goal of engaging their peers and the public in deep, meaningful ways. Before I discuss the rhetorical education we have been refining at my institution, though, I first want to outline what a more traditional rhetoric and writing course might look like, as a way of illustrating how our pedagogy is working, in a different way, to address contexts of our times.

The key terms and rhetorical concepts that often drive and define a course in rhetoric are, not surprisingly, persuasion and argument. The expectation for the rhetoric teacher has been to teach students to argue, to assert themselves in a conversation, to make their case, and to support their claims. In the traditional rhetoric classroom, students learn to craft ethos, pathos, and logos appeals towards the goal of *moving* audiences. With this purpose in mind, the conventional course often asks students to identify an issue—gun control, cyber bullying, recycling policies—and then spend the semester inserting themselves into this debate. A primary mode of rhetorical work within this curriculum is for students not only to generate their own thesis and arguments, but also to identify what the claims of the “other side” are and then to discern ways to attack and defeat that “side.” Thus, the goal for many assignments within this conventional pedagogical paradigm is to win the debate and to come up with the argument that “betters” the opponent’s. While this course hopefully does not replicate the sad state of American uncivil public discourse outlined above, it can be seen to contribute to it by suggesting that the goal of public discourse is to argue one’s own side with the goal of winning the debate and, in turn, defeat the other’s.

The rhetorical program I advance in this essay and am developing with the administrative team at my institution is much different than this more traditional course. Instead of asking students to begin the course by staking their claims within an issue and finding ways to attack the *other side*, the goal for this program is to re-orient students’ understandings of what rhetorical and civic engagement can be. A rhetorical education that values inquiry relies on teaching students how to ask questions and to reflect on their own understandings of the issue *before* they make an argument. The work is to dedicate a great deal of time to this inquiry so that students can dwell in the work of questioning and reflecting on these questions for a good part of the term. This period of inquiry is not haphazard or unguided; rather students use this time to move through a staged, overt, and purposeful process of question asking. The activities and assignments that habituate students to inquiry help them to see what the work of questioning does and how it enables them to engage in public discussion

in deep and capacious ways. Furthermore, this inquiry-based pedagogy teaches students to rethink what they know and how they know it while also discovering what others are arguing and why those arguments might (or might not) make sense. There's no sussing out and defeating the "other side." Instead, the goal is to discern and explore multiple perspectives. The ultimate pedagogical end is not for students to defend their position or even change their minds, but rather to learn how to critically examine their own stances while taking in and considering the arguments of others. A critical point to note here is that pedagogies invested in inquiry are *deeply* rhetorical. Students move through an inquiry process that enables them to take part in public discussions in which the first step is not to fire back an argument or to retreat from debate but instead to ask questions and think. Indeed, as Aristotle himself made clear, the end of rhetoric is not persuasion. As he defined it, rhetoric is the "ability, in each particular to case, to see the available means of persuasion" (2007, p. 37). A rhetorical education based in inquiry teaches students to hesitate, to observe, and to explore what those available means might be.

Below, I illustrate what this rhetorical education looks like in practice, and to do so, I draw from curricular materials from my institution. The assignment sequence within this rhetorical education is a scaffolded one, meaning that each project builds on the work of the previous assignment and prepares students for the one that follows. I should state too that this focus on inquiry as part of students' rhetorical education works to help them achieve the learning outcomes established for the course and agreed upon by my university's Fundamental Studies curriculum committee. The sixth and final outcome for the course reads as follows: "Students will demonstrate an understanding of the connection between writing and thinking and use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating in an academic setting." Building on this learning outcome, the sequence with our standard syllabus prompts students to practice inquiry in staged and specific ways, and, together, the projects enable them to reach the ultimate rhetorical effort of the semester. The sequence begins with an appropriately titled Inquiry Assignment, and then students move on to the Digital Forum and Position Paper. For each assignment the work of inquiry is central, as students write their way through a series of projects in which they question, research, explore, and reflect—a process that eventually leads them to argument.

The Inquiry assignment is the first major project of the term, and here students choose an issue they will consider and re-consider throughout the semester. This first assignment orients students to the

practice of inquiry. In the assignment description, we (and by “we” I mean the administrative team and the Academic Writing faculty) attempt to discern for students the distinction between the dominant rhetorical practices students might observe in American public culture and the work of the course in general and the assignment more particularly. Here, we write that the goal of this project is for students to learn that they do not need to “rush to take a side or argue a case with the goal of winning” (Academic Writing Program 2017b). Rather, this assignment asks them to think through and explore the issue first: the work is to “engage an issue thoughtfully, [so that students are] open to learn about the issue itself and the positions of others.” Their task for the assignment is to take up two related rhetorical tasks: (1) to articulate the exigence and significance of the issue they have chosen as one worthy of exploration, explaining how and why this issue is of public import and (2) to identify and unpack questions they and others pose and address when they confront this issue. Thus, the act of question-asking takes precedence.

The keys to this project are the three smaller-scale activities that enable students to pursue and accomplish this inquiry work. The first activity (see below) provides students with a set of self-reflection heuristics—and by heuristics, I mean specific sets of questions that students ask of themselves with the goal of coming to knowledge. By responding to heuristics such as those listed below, students, we hope, gain a more acute awareness of the knowledge and biases they may already hold regarding this issue.

- What is the issue you have chosen and why have you chosen to explore this issue this semester?
- What is your relationship to, experience with, investment in this issue? Why is (or isn't) this issue meaningful to you?
- What do you already know about this issue?
- How did you come to this knowledge? Who have you talked with about it? What research have you conducted? In what contexts and situations?
- What *don't* you know about this issue? What do you want to learn about this issue?
- How might your knowledge and previous experience shape the work you do this semester?
- What are your goals as you pursue this issue throughout this semester?

(Academic Writing 2017e)

These questions prompt students to reflect critically on their own initial knowledge, motivations, and even biases. The purpose is for

students to attune themselves to and articulate the fact that they likely come to this issue with ideas already in mind and that to take on the work of the semester, they need to practice a kind of self-interrogation to gain a sense of what this knowledge is and how it might affect their semester's work.

A second smaller-scale activity within the Inquiry sequence hinges on a key concept that we try to habituate students to, the concept of *listening*. As rhetorician Krista Ratcliffe has so eloquently argued in her book *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, listening is a rhetorical practice that is rarely taught and often overlooked (2005). Especially in the world we live in now, teaching students to listen should be a pedagogical priority. As Ratcliffe makes clear, we need to be careful when we teach students about listening as a rhetorical practice because the goal should not be to listen for what Ratcliffe calls “mastery” or to identify weakness in the other side's arguments (p. 28). Instead, for students to engage in the practice of inquiry and critical engagement, students need to learn to listen with the goal of “receptivity” and with the “intent to understand” (Ratcliffe 2015, p. 28).

To work towards this kind of listening in our curriculum, we incorporate an annotated bibliography assignment within the early weeks of the inquiry unit in which students identify ten sources that will help them to assess and understand the issue they will explore throughout the semester. Students participate in a research session at our library, and the goal is to work through yet another set of heuristics as they conduct their research: Who is engaging this issue? What are these interlocutors saying? What are their claims, investments, and interests? How are they approaching this issue? What is new, surprising, compelling, or even problematic to you as you assess these resources?

As they respond to these questions and conduct their research, students compose their annotated bibliographies. The focus here for students is not to challenge the writings encountered but to *summarize* them—to represent fairly and capaciously what the source is about. And here we underscore the deeply rhetorical and indeed ethical value of summary: while some may see summary as elementary or simplistic, we maintain that fair and concise summary is foundational to rhetorical instruction and rhetorical practice, especially during this “post-truth” and “fake news” moment in the United States. Furthermore, the assignment asks students to gain a richer sense of the conversation they are entering: a critical part of their annotations is also to explain how this source contributes to the student's growing

understanding of the issue *and* to show how each resource offers a different perspective than the others.

The third key activity that undergirds the inquiry assignment is one that teaches students the *rhetorical language* that will enable them to write within the stylistic register of inquiry. In this exercise, we work with students to identify the terms that indicate and designate that an inquiry is at work in an essay. Here students learn “inquiry words,” such as *how*, *why*, *when*, *where*, and *why*, but they also consider how other terms trigger inquiry and contemplation—terms like *explore*, *wonder*, *contemplate*, and *speculate* as well as *yet*, *may*, *whether*, and *however*. Here the goal is for students to discern how inquiry operates at the sentence level, and they are encouraged to review their own essay drafts to see how they are deploying these and other “inquiry” words. This seemingly simple exercise is effective because it helps students identify the specific language choices that enable them to work within the register of inquiry.

These three activities together, along with a number of others, support the overarching goals of the inquiry assignment, which prompt students to learn how to ask and think through a variety of questions. Indeed, the assessment criterion for the assignment evaluates students on how well they *resist* argument and sustain inquiry throughout their essays. Here, for example, are two elements of our assessment rubric that direct teachers to focus on students’ inquiry work:

1. The student crafts an insightful, complex, and open-ended question that guides an inquiry and opens a field of scholarly conversation.
2. The student pursues the guiding question throughout the essay by resisting argument and closure, thoughtfully deepening the chosen audience’s understanding of the issue. The student engages in the process of inquiry through nuanced, accurate, and unbiased portrayals of varied aspects of the issue (Academic Writing Program 2017d).

Thus, when reading and responding to students’ essays, instructors keep these two main assessment criteria in mind. The goal therefore is that the student engages in the process of inquiry through nuanced, accurate, and unbiased portrayals of varied aspects of the issue. Ultimately, through this initial project, students learn the significance of and habituate themselves to inquiry. In scholar Stacey Waite’s words, through engaging in a rigorous process of inquiry, students learn that “the goal of inquiry is not to answer questions but to raise questions” (2017a). Students habituate themselves to thinking, reflecting, learning, and questioning before taking a stance, and they also practice



embracing complexity and “explore the dimensions of a problem in ways that do not erase or ignore the unknown” (Waite).

The Digital Forum is the second major project in the assignment sequence that also works to engage students in the practice of inquiry and resist argument so that they continue to develop their understanding of the issue they have chosen. In this project, students refine their digital composing skills by designing a website that is dedicated to their issue. The goal of this website, though, is to *teach* their readers—the website visitors—about their issue by describing and defining the issue and then identifying the major stakeholders in the debate along with the various positions these individuals and groups hold. As the title of the assignment makes clear, the student’s task is to offer their audience a *forum* and to create a conversation by showing stakeholders in dialogue:

Your goal is to offer three discrete lines of argument within your debate, showing how stakeholders engage, refute, or elaborate on each other’s claims. Remember, though, this is a *forum*. Thus, the arguments you provide should be in conversation with one another. They should be debating similar topics, engaging the discussion points, elaborating on one another’s ideas, or raising concerns about the others’ positions. In sum, you should think of the stakeholders within your forum as talking with one another. (Academic Writing Program 2017a)

Through the digital forum, students build on and extend work that they took up in the Inquiry Assignment. Whereas in that previous assignment, students explored their issue in broad strokes, in the Digital Forum, students discern the specific positions of particular stakeholders and show how these stakeholders engage one another. Once again, a key element in this assignment is for students to conduct research: part of the project is for them to identify five new sources that help them move forward with their inquiry and investigation. To help students see stakeholders’ *diverse* positions, the assignment asks students to identify three stakeholder groups instead of two. The hope here is that students avoid the pitfall of a “one side and then the *other side*” type of debate and instead consider how people approach issues from multiple perspectives beyond “yes” or “no.” There is one specific exercise, however, that lies at the heart of the Digital Forum project that focuses students’ attention, once again, on the significance of inquiry, and prompts students to work through yet another set of heuristics.

The rhetorical centerpiece for the Digital Forum that enables students to continue their inquiry work is stasis theory. Stasis theory

is an ancient rhetorical tool that enabled rhetors to work through a staged inquiry process that reveals the multiple arguments at play within an issue. More particularly, stasis theory helps rhetors identify in a systematic way where points of debate and disagreement within an issue might be. Students use the following stasis worksheet to direct their work as they compose their digital forum assignments:

Stasis	Questions	Stakeholder #1
Conjecture	Did it happen?	
	Does it exist?	
Definition	What is it?	
	How is it defined?	
	What are its characteristics?	
	How might one categorize it?	
Cause & Effect	How did this come to be?	
	What are its consequences?	
Quality	Is it a good or bad thing?	
	Is it right or wrong, honorable or dishonorable?	
	Is it better or worse, more or less desirable than any alternatives?	
Action	What should be done about this?	
	What actions are possible?	
	What proposals shall we make about it?	
Jurisdiction	Who should handle this matter?	
	Who has the right and knowledge to decide this matter?	

Figure 1: Stasis Exercise (Academic Writing Program 2017c)

In thinking through this exercise, imagine how a student working on the issue of hate speech, for example, would make use of these stasis prompts and this systematic inquiry process. Focusing attention first on the stasis of conjecture, the student would ask questions of existence: Where and when has hate speech occurred? What are instances of hate speech? And the student here would note and map out how various interlocutors would respond to these particular questions and debate one another’s answers. Moving to the stasis of definition, the student would consider the various ways stakeholders define hate speech and how they categorize it: What exactly is hate speech? What are its characteristics and qualities? Does hate speech fall under the category of free speech or is it a crime? Engaging the stasis of cause and effect, the student would explore how interlocutors debate the reasons for and consequences of hate speech. In regards to quality, the student would consider the value of hate speech: Do people argue that hate speech is a good thing? Is this a point of contention? The stasis of action would ask students to consider how stakeholders argue about what should be done about hate speech, identifying arguments

for education or legal recourse as possibilities. Finally, the student would explore how stakeholders respond to the stasis of jurisdiction: Who has the power and expertise to make decisions about what we should do about hate speech?

This very brief overview of the stasis theory activity reveals how students move through a structured, staged inquiry process that enables them to pinpoint the multiple and various points of debate within the issue they have chosen. Through this questioning process, students might see that some responses to the stasis heuristics are more interesting and indeed more volatile than others. Returning to the hate speech example, students would likely find that centering attention on the value stasis is not really worthwhile because few would likely argue that hate speech is a good thing. On the other hand, this inquiry exercise would reveal the vigorous debate that interlocutors take on when it comes to questions of definition or action.

Building from their work in this exercise, students create their Digital Forum websites by identifying the stasis points that stakeholders are most invested in and that reveal where the significant discussions are happening. One student may thus center her writing on how stakeholders focus attention on the stasis of consequence and action while another might compose a Digital Forum focused on the stasis of jurisdiction. The key here is that inquiry drives the work of the Digital Forum because once again students are stepping back from the issue and their own argument to ask questions first about the debate itself and then the kind and variety of arguments that are made within it.

It is only after students produce their inquiry essays and their digital forum projects that we ask them to *finally* assert their own arguments in their position papers. At the end of the semester, students are prompted to reflect on all the questioning, research, and writing they have done throughout the term and to insert their voice into the conversation. The goal at this point, of course, is for students to produce thoughtful, complex arguments that are sensitive and attentive to those they are speaking with. Indeed, a critical part of their composing process for the position paper is for them to overtly engage the counterarguments to their claims and to show that they have considered the concerns others have raised and the challenges some may make. Scholar-teacher John Duffy underscores the value of this rhetorical practice, writing, “when we teach students to include counter-arguments in their essays for the purpose of considering seriously opinions, facts, or values that contradict their own, we are teaching the most potentially transformative practice of all” (p. 220). One hopeful result of our inquiry-based curriculum is that students can now do the work Duffy praises. By

working through a staged questioning and learning process, students are learning, in Duffy's words, "to expose themselves to the doubts and contradictions that adhere to difficult questions" (p. 220). In so doing, they are demonstrating how "to listen to others," and ultimately cultivate the "dispositions of tolerance, generosity, and self-awareness" (p. 220).

This essay works to demonstrate the key role inquiry can play in a rhetorical education that addresses the contexts and constraints of twenty-first century public discourse within the United States. But, of course, this pedagogy is not a perfect one, and to conclude, I quickly point to one major concern and then a possibility for additional research. First, this inquiry-based sequence that focuses on civility could be read negatively by some. For instance, Nancy Welch, Ben Kuebrich, and Hannah Ashley (2019) argue that *incivility* is often an effective and necessary rhetorical strategy especially for under-represented and marginalized groups, and instructors of rhetoric should not discount the value of incivility for our students. As Welch argues, pleas for civility can "functio[n] to hold in check agitation against a social order that is undemocratic in access to decision-making and unequal in distribution of wealth" (Welch 2012, p. 36). Taking this particular argument to heart, it is critical to consider how we as teachers are casting civility and to whom civility serves. As I move forward with my team to work on this sequence, our framing of civility will be a prime concern.

Second, and relatedly, our program does not yet have empirical data on the efficacy of this form of rhetorical education. Yes, we have crafted a thoughtful sequence based in rhetorical theory and pedagogical scholarship, but the next step is to assess this work: How are students moving beyond the class to engage the public (if they are at all)? What is the efficacy of this pedagogy? A tracking of students beyond the course to learn whether and how they intervene in public discourse would yield insights on the value of this instruction and revisions we might make to it.

Even with these concerns in mind and as we identify priorities for future work, I along with my administrative team continue to value the rhetorical education we've crafted—an *inquiry*-based rhetorical education that gives students the time and space to think, to ask questions, and to reflect critically on their own emerging positions as well as those held by others. To be sure, some students in our program anecdotally report that through this process their arguments changed; that at the start of the semester, they weren't engaging their issue in a deep, thoughtful way, or that they had never really considered what and why others might make the claims that they do. Of course,

other students report that through this process, their position did not radically alter. However, they often acknowledge that through inquiry and reflection, they realized how they should nuance their claims or shift their argument. In the end, the main goal is for students to *habituate* themselves to inquiry, reflection, and engagement instead of uncivil attack or retreat. This rhetorical education is successful when students hesitate, question, and listen before they argue, for if and when they do, they will fulfill Aristotle's promise for the rhetor and for rhetoric: they will use inquiry as a means to observe the available means of persuasion.

### Notes

1. I have worked with a number of administrative teams during my time as director, and I mark here the excellent contributions of Heather Lindenman, Lindsay Dunne Jacoby, Martin Camper, Justin Lohr, Elizabeth Miller, Ruth Osorio, Cameron Mozafari, Danielle Griffin, Nabila Hijazi, Katherine Joshi, and Scott Eklund.
2. For more on Waite's pedagogical practice and theory, see *Teaching Queer* (2017b).
3. Martin Camper's excellent presentation before our first-year writing faculty at the University of Maryland in August 2017 catalyzed much of our thinking about stasis. I am grateful for his ideas and his generosity in sharing them. For additional scholarship on stasis pedagogy see Anderson (1997), Camper (2017), Eberly (2002), and Foster (2005).
4. Readers interested in exploring the connections between rhetorical education and civic engagement will find interest in Alexander, Jarratt, and Welch's *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics* (2019).

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