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Engagement: rhetoric's tale from the field

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ABSTRACT

'Engagement' has since the mid-1990s led to a series of initiatives and campus centers wherein many universities attempt strategies that are primarily administrative and programmatic. By contrast, our tale from the field points to an inherent and original connection between rhetoric and engagement; we propose that the fundamental principles of rhetoric and communication equip scholars to work effectively toward the goal of engaged research and teaching. Our stories from the University of Texas Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium and from the University of Pittsburgh's Honors College indicate that there is significant value and power in taking to heart the lessons of the discipline for our own actions and lives as educators. Acting on what we know directs us toward such concepts as invention, discovery, argument, deliberation, advocacy, and intervention – the rhetorical instruments needed to change the academic culture and create environments for engaged learning.

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Our tale from the field is about academic engagement, documenting that the fundamental principles of rhetoric and communication equip scholars to work more effectively toward the goal of engaged research and teaching. If, as we contend, our discipline is concerned with the integration of theory and practice for the engineering of situated human action, then moving engagement from a nebulous fad to a contextual practice is about enacting the expertise we already have. Thus, devoting ourselves more to administrative roles and duties may not be the only or even the most effective way to pursue engagement. Rather, if we *do* what we *know* as theorists, critics, and researchers, we may become engaged scholars and teachers, changing the university from the inside; indeed, if we do what we know, we already are.

'Engagement' has since the mid-1990s been one of those buzzwords that led to new initiatives, programs, and centers. Most universities and colleges enthusiastically get onboard, hoping to discover the most functional ways to embrace the new theme; faculty and students across campus are called upon to demonstrate how what they are working on fits with the new platform. 'Enthralled by the current momentum of the engagement discourse and the fundability of related initiatives, campus planners often rush to create delivery mechanisms without further reflection' (Hartelius & Cherwitz, 2010, p. 437). This logistical approach to engagement exacerbates scholars' tendency to

compartmentalize our academic expertise, separating it from the activities of our daily lives. Scholars forget that knowledge, theories, and data have tremendous potential to affect the lives of students and the university at large.

The inherent connection between rhetoric and engagement has animated our collaboration for many years. In a forum in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, we coined the term ‘Dorothy Doctrine’ of engagement, arguing that the field of rhetoric and communication has had engagement ‘all along.’ We asserted that, ‘For the art of situated and practical reason, whose purpose is a fitting response to social exigencies and the engineering of human action, the significance and inevitability of engagement is evident’ (Hartelius & Cherwitz, 2010, p. 435). Further, in a handbook for communication graduate students, we advocated a shift from credentialing and entitlement to more deliberate invention and ownership using the language of ‘intellectual entrepreneurship’ (Hartelius & Cherwitz, 2008). We suggested graduate students, on their way to becoming scholars and teachers, begin to think of engagement as integral, not extraneous, to their academic training and practice. Turning then to an audience of higher education administrators, we argued that the field of rhetoric and communication, ‘one of the most venerable academic disciplines, informs our ability to devise and implement an effective philosophy of university engagement’ (Cherwitz & Hartelius, 2007, p. 266). Invaluable tools for the pursuit of engagement are available within rhetoric and communication. What this essay and the stories that follow reveal is that there is significant value and power in taking to heart the lessons of the discipline for our own actions and lives as educators. Below we offer brief accounts of our experiences with academic engagement; these are our tales from the field.

Rick’s tale: multiple hats and rhetorical engineering

Normally we live our lives isolated from our scholarly selves. Yet what researchers know and theorize has enormous practical consequence beyond its immediate impact on students; it has lessons for us as well. There is a certain irony in saying this. I was a tenured full professor who in 1995 became a dean in the graduate school at The University of Texas at Austin (UT). One of the issues with which I first wrestled was how better to prepare graduate students in all disciplines for effective and resilient careers inside as well as outside of academe – something at which most institutions like UT were not doing well. This was an enormous challenge in view of the staid character of graduate education and embedded nature of academic disciplines. It led to my creating what at first was called the Graduate School Professional Development program (GSPD), the goal of which was to educate citizen scholars – individuals who could leverage their knowledge to make a difference; the program included over one dozen university-wide graduate courses, workshops, interdisciplinary programs and community action seminars open to graduate students in all disciplines. Students were attracted to these initiatives in large numbers, seeing them as the only opportunity to explore the value of their academic knowledge and develop the skills needed to succeed in the academy and beyond. However, the challenge was to gain acceptance from faculty and administrators in order to change the culture of graduate education and secure funding to sustain and expand the program.

What I eventually realized was that meeting this challenge required me temporarily to remove my hat as an administrator and begin thinking like the rhetorician I was, taking to

heart what I learned years prior as a student and scholar of rhetoric. Put simply, it became clear to me that cultural change doesn't start with the logistics of a program; it begins with the rhetoric used to label, deliver, and justify those programs. For the next few years, therefore, I began to jettison the 'professional development,' 'outreach,' 'service' language that initially undergirded the GSPD program. The new title was Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE), with emphasis placed on how the program was not about providing students remedial skills and 'helping' them supplement their knowledge in a field and obtain a job, but instead a way to 'empower' students to be more effective at 'doing' a discipline and maximizing its value in a variety of venues. Understanding and practicing my own discipline, in short, enabled me to help faculty and administrators view IE in a manner that avoided the binaries that often defeat such initiatives – for example, teaching versus research, applied versus basic research, research versus engagement, soft skills versus disciplinary knowledge. What in essence I was demonstrating was what rhetoricians have known for thousands of years, viz., that there is an inherent interaction between form and content, invention and disposition, discovery and propagation. The result was that IE now was placed on a stronger academic footing enabling us to document its centrality to disciplines and their mission.

In telling this story I am reminded of when one of my colleagues asked me to talk to his Communication honors seminar shortly after I became a dean; specifically, he wanted me to explain why I chose to 'push paper' rather than remain a productive scholar in the field. The answer presented to the students was that I desired to do more than study and theorize about rhetoric and change. I wished to 'do' rhetoric to create change. With this ambition I was beginning to realize that rhetoricians might spend less time engaging in 'reverse engineering,' taking things apart merely to understand how they work and because we have the intellectual prowess to do so. I was discovering the important results that can occur when rhetoricians use their discipline to become engineers and designers, creating outcomes and theories of value to more than a handful of scholars sequestered in academe.

Johanna's tale: engagement and the introductory course

During my first year as an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh, I was assigned to teach one of the department's introductory lecture classes, paired with a one-credit honors recitation, an optional addition to the regular discussion sections required of students. In the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, honors recitations had been taught for many years as supplements to lecture courses in the sciences; my section would be the first in the humanities. It was an enticing experiment in the effort to close the gap between the number of students who undertake advanced undergraduate research in the natural sciences and students in the humanities who pursue comparable opportunities within their own departments. The assistant dean of the Honors College, who brought the opportunity to my attention and who knew about my background with the IE program at the University of Texas, suggested that the Honors College's ideals were a productive match with my own vision of engaged learning: student-initiated projects, independent study, complex and reflective perspective-taking, concrete problem-solving.

Drawing on my expertise as a rhetorical theorist and critic, I was thrilled to face the challenge of developing an honors curriculum using rhetoric as a platform for

engagement. An honors-level laboratory for a rhetoric class seemed like a promising way to realize some of my long-time objectives. Indeed, the assignment became a way to launch ideas that were discussed during my interview process in 2013, but that had stalled a bit as a result of institutional constraints. Further, imagining the overwhelming prospect of advocating change (in language and concepts) within a titanic institution, in effect ‘pitching’ rhetoric as a vehicle for academic engagement to higher administration, I was delighted to have a chance to pilot engagement on a small scale. Given full discretion to design the recitation curriculum, I thought of ways to prepare the students to really *use* rhetoric for whatever ends they sought.

The semester’s first meeting of the honors recitation is an extension of the first day lecture. The lecture, familiar no doubt to most of *JACR*’s readers, offers a quick ‘fly over’ of multiple definitions; rhetoric is an ability; rhetoric is a practice; rhetoric is a product, and so on. In the recitation, then, I let the students introduce themselves to the group by asking them individually, What do *you* want? What do you want to *do*, and *who* do you want to be? And here is the critical point at which I begin explaining how rhetoric can be valuable to them, and what on earth an honors recitation in rhetoric is: What if rhetoric is an organized way to study a problem and invent a solution? What if rhetoric is the discovery of what is possible? Nothing more and nothing less. The students begin squirming as I start to sound like a car saleswoman and/or revival preacher. You want to break into the music industry as an agent? You want to run a non-profit in Latin America? You want to advocate for young women in sports? What if rhetoric is the ability to leverage your own expertise in order to enter the market place or the public sphere with a strategy and a goal? A way to mobilize what you learn about rhetoric in the main course in the pursuit of your own academic, professional, and personal goals? At this point, the students’ interest is piqued.

Assigned to mobilize content from the main course, each student is required to submit a project plan at the beginning of the semester. The plan, which is subject to continual revision, details the student’s objectives and progress on a timeline, determined by the student. Most important, the plan is the basis for each student’s final evaluation; every student is assessed and graded against the standard set in self-designed plan. A successful student has not only completed the tasks outlined in this plan, but has also maintained a reflective orientation to the developing project throughout the semester. With such reflection, a successful student revises and adapts as knowledge and experience with the subject grow. And at every stage, the question I ask is: How will what you learned this week inform what you’re doing in your project? Does understanding the tension between style and substance, a dialectic with a long history in rhetoric and communication, make you think differently about the project you are developing? As the semester moves along, students learn to engage such questions cogently, creatively, and deliberately.

During my three semesters teaching the honors recitation, challenges emerged: the first was a matter of orientation. For an instructor who tends toward curricular organization, the unpredictability of the laboratory model is unnerving. It takes discipline on my part not to provide explicit instructions, particularly when students are struggling – struggling to decide what they want their project to be; struggling to discern whether their projects are making progress; struggling to decide what to do when inevitably they encounter an obstacle and are forced to adapt an original plan; and struggling to figure out how what they are trying to accomplish might be informed by rhetoric. My task, which mirrors

theirs, is to abide uncertainty and to facilitate the genuine discovery inherent in it. I have to resist telling them what to do and ‘how it is’ precisely at the moment when they are about to discover it for themselves. Engagement for them is the frightening prospect of using what they know (and of course realizing that they know something useful) to accomplish a task that they have chosen for themselves.

That the honors recitation leads humanities students in their first or second year of college toward advanced research opportunities is one of its positive outcomes. Even more significant (for my money) is that via rhetoric it facilitates student engagement; the recitation is an incubator in which I, rather than just teach my subject matter, advise students on how to use that subject’s fundamental principles to devise strategies for developing their own purposeful identities and interventions.

Rhetoric is a tale from the field

Effecting change within universities is an onerous task, whether that change is geared toward engagement or any other goal. As Wittenberg-Lyles and Goldsmith (2015) note in their contribution to the ‘Tales from the Field’ series, ‘Engagement is daunting work’ (p. 135). But this work is informed by our own expertise as scholars of rhetoric and communication, providing us invaluable resources. These disciplinary resources indeed may be more effective than the traditional tools normally used by administrators. As our tale from the field reveals, acting on what we know directs us toward such concepts as invention, discovery, argument, deliberation, advocacy, and intervention – the rhetorical instruments needed to change the academic culture and create environments for engaged learning. We can accomplish this as scholars at any level – as deans or as assistant professors. Because our academic expertise in rhetoric and communication is at its core engaged, even our smallest objectives are motivated by and anchored to what we know to be true: Language constitutes the social and political world inside and outside of the academy; students trained in language use are well-suited to make important interventions in both.

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