

Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson is AHRC Research Fellow in Classics Education at King's College London. She conducts research in Classics education, advises curriculum and assessment organisations, and trains teachers internationally.



A winning formula: Classical rhetoric for oracy education

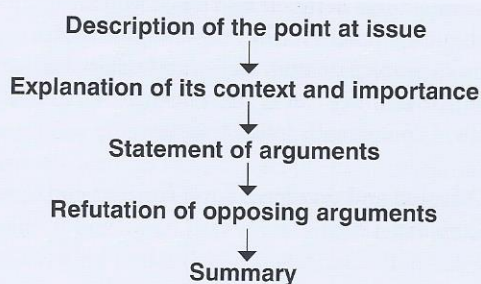
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In this article **Arlene Holmes-Henderson** argues that ancient traditions of rhetoric remain a relevant source for teachers to draw on precisely because those techniques are still evident in contemporary politics and marketing. In the current climate where schools are encouraged to equip students with the skills to spot fake news, teaching them the concepts to describe how language is being manipulated seems like a fun and practical part of the mix. Anyone for a quick game of spot the synecdoche?

Classical rhetoric has, since ancient times, been an important feature of the Humanities curriculum. In this article, I summarise the role rhetoric played in Greek and Roman society and I suggest ways in which familiarity with rhetoric can both enrich oracy education across the contemporary school curriculum and bring benefits for citizens beyond school.

How did rhetoric come about?

In the early Greek world, military prowess was the indicator of success. There was no need for persuasive communication because power ensured compliance. It was only in 476BC when the Greek tyranny was overthrown, that law-courts were suddenly flooded with people trying to recover property through self-representation. For the first time, there was the need for individual citizens to speak up in public. A certain Corax (about whom we know very little) was the first to devise a method for effective argumentation and it went like this:



Rhetoric is the art of enchanting the soul.



(Plato)

This is the first known example of a rhetorical method. People started to follow his example and were amazed by their ability to secure their desired end. As Greek democracy developed, it became increasingly important for citizens to be able to represent themselves articulately in order to contribute to public discussions about justice, welfare, war, the economy, politics and numerous other civic issues.

As the importance of talk grew, specialist 'rhetoric schools' emerged in the Greek world and, later, rhetoric continued to play an important role in Roman education. Famous names like Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Cicero and Quintilian all discussed the importance of rhetorical training for young men aged 16-20 as part of their preparation for life as an adult in society.

The trouble is that they did not agree on what rhetoric actually is.

What is Classical rhetoric?

Ancient authors' definitions of rhetoric vary, as can be seen below:

Plato: Rhetoric is the "art of enchanting the soul."

Aristotle: "It is a counterpart of both logic and politics - and is the faculty of utilising, in any given case, the available means of persuasion."

Cicero: Rhetoric is "speech designed to persuade."

Quintilian: "Rhetoric is the art of speaking well" or "...the good man speaking well."

For today's teachers of Citizenship, Politics,

Feature

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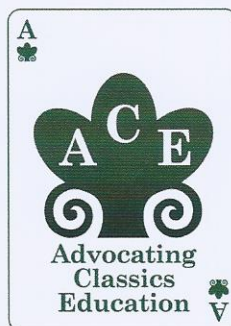
Philosophy, Classics and English, there are interesting discussions to be had about the intersection of rhetoric and truth; using language to get what you want but with questionable moral motivations. These discussions are important and are likely to generate a number of opposing viewpoints. What matters, though, is that the rhetorical method provides a tried-and-tested approach to the construction and deconstruction of argument which is no less relevant and useful today than it was 2000 years ago.

So how can rhetoric enhance learning across the curriculum?

The Citizenship curriculum in England requires that students can ‘research and interrogate evidence, debate and evaluate viewpoints, make persuasive and reasoned arguments, justify and substantiate their conclusions and take informed action’. Applying the rhetorical method involves not just following the formula, it requires critical thinking to select the most valuable pieces of information to support your argument. The structured approach provides a framework through which students can ‘think deeply and critically about a wide range of political, social, economic and ethical issues’. Once the most compelling pieces of evidence are selected, the critical thinking continues to the arrangement stage – how can I arrange these pieces of information for maximum impact?

Rhetoric also cultivates critical literacy skills – the ability to read between the lines of others’ communication. The Greeks and Romans developed a handbook of more than a hundred rhetorical techniques which added colour and style to their speeches. I can certainly attest, from professional practice of teaching these rhetorical techniques in both Latin and English, that students have ‘lightbulb moments’ when they realise that politicians, advertisers and broadcasters still use these techniques today. Miss, does that mean that the latest Sony advert is actually a chiasmus? Yes. Oh, and the advert for Transport for London is synecdoche? Yes, yes it is. Why do so many brands use ancient rhetorical techniques today? Because they have persuaded people for 2500 years – they work. We ought to be teaching them to our young people to equip them to see through rhetorical flourish to discern truth. This, for me, is the essence of critical literacy and it is transferable to every subject on the curriculum.

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A selection of classical rhetorical devices

Alliteration: Repetition of the same sound beginning several words in sequence. ‘Let us go forth to lead the land we love’. J. F. Kennedy

Anaphora: The repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses or lines. ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair’. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Anticlimax: A rhetorical term for an abrupt shift from a serious or noble tone to a less exalted one – often for comic effect. ‘In moments of crisis I size up the situation in a flash, set my teeth, contract my muscles, take a firm grip on myself and, without a tremor, always do the wrong thing’. George Bernard Shaw

Antithesis: The placing of a sentence or one of its parts against another to which it is opposed to form a balanced contrast of ideas, as in ‘Man proposes, God disposes’.

Apostrophe: When a writer (or speaker) uses words to speak directly to a person or an opponent, or to an imaginary person, location, deity, abstract quality or idea, not actually present. ‘O black night, nurse of the golden eyes!’ Euripides

Asyndeton: Deliberate omission of conjunctions between a series of words, phrases, or clauses. The effects of this device are to emphasize each clause and to produce a punctuated rhythm in the sentence. ‘I came, I saw, I conquered’. Julius Caesar

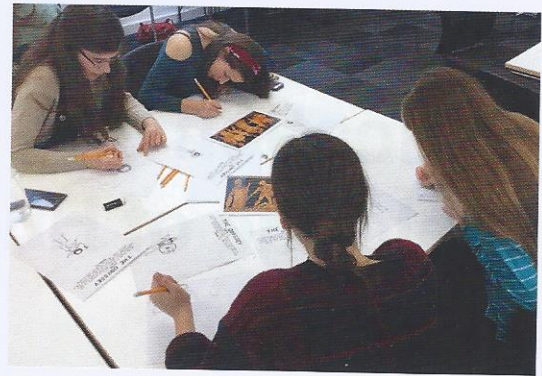
(Adapted and excerpted from Corbett and Connors, 1998)

Rhetoric is about speech. According to the ancients, the giving of speeches was about so much more than the words. There were rules governing body language and hand gestures. At rhetoric school, boys learned about the modes of persuasion – ethos, pathos and logos, where the comportment and reputation of the speaker, together with his (and, in the ancient world it was almost always ‘his’) ability to gauge and respond to the feelings of his audience were considered just as vital as the content of his speech. Ethos and pathos have important implications for oracy across the citizenship curriculum today – Burgoon’s 1985 study reckoned that 65% of communication was non-verbal. Our learners need to know this, and be taught how to optimise all aspects of talking and listening – the Greeks and Romans thought about this a great deal and offer us a treasure-trove of ideas, together with a step-by-step manual.

How can rhetoric support oracy skills beyond the curriculum?

Rhetoric can help cultivate critical listening – equipping learners to deconstruct the speech of others and ‘read between the lines’. This is so important outside school where young and old alike are bombarded with communication of all types and need some way of judging what they hear. I am suggesting that rhetoric offers a structure which, if applied, presents a path through the competing narratives.

But it is in the construction of communication that I think rhetoric can most usefully boost oracy skills. For the ancients, proficiency in rhetoric was inextricably linked to active and participatory conceptions of citizenship. To become ‘responsible citizens’ (a capacity which is prominent in Scotland’s ‘Curriculum for Excellence’ [Holmes-Henderson 2016]) young people need to be able to express themselves and their opinions in an accessible and persuasive way. Is rhetoric the only way? No. But if we are to move beyond weak notions of citizenship like volunteering, being environmentally friendly, picking up litter – to stronger notions including questioning the status quo, disrupting ineffective civic structures and imagining alternatives which promote social justice – learners need to become Quintilian’s ‘good people speaking well’, particularly if we expect political literacy and, by extension, democratic deliberation to flourish in our society. This fulfils another of the GCSE Citizenship curriculum aims



‘to experience and evaluate different ways that citizens can act together to solve problems and contribute to society’.

We can learn a great deal by looking at the history of communication. Rhetoric is one method through which we can teach oracy and the associated benefits include critical thinking, critical literacy and responsible citizenship.

Want to know more?

The Advocating Classics Education project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, seeks to widen access to Classics education in non-fee-paying British schools. Free training, resources and events are available to teachers who would like to find out more about introducing elements of Classics (in translation) to their teaching. See www.aceclassics.org.uk

Further reading suggestions

Burgoon, J. (1985) ‘Nonverbal signals’, in M. Knapp and G. Miller (eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*. Sage Publications, 344-390.

Corbett, E. and Connors, R. (1998) *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. Oxford University Press.

Forsyth, M. (2014) *The elements of eloquence: how to turn the perfect English phrase*. Icon Books.

Holmes-Henderson (2016) ‘Responsible citizenship and critical skills in Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: the contribution of Classical rhetoric to democratic deliberation’ in P. Carr, P.L. Thomas, B. Porfilio and J. Gorlewski, *Democracy and decency: what does education have to do with it?* Information Age Publishers.

Leith, S. (2012) You talkin’ to me? *Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama*. Profile Books.

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