

Present Tense

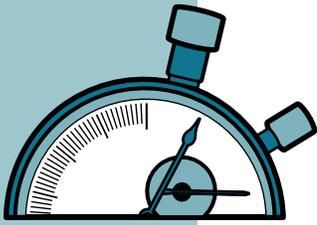
A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

Course Review:
Environmental Rhetoric, Ethics, and
Policy - Teaching Engagement

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Course Review: Environmental Rhetoric, Ethics, and Policy – Teaching Engagement

Derek G. Ross

This article continues our review series on civic engagement and writing by providing a curriculum-level perspective on an environmental rhetoric class at Auburn University. The review series began in our first issue with [Dr. Jim Dubinsky's article on his program at Virginia Tech](#) and continued in our second issue with [Kelly Brotzman's review of Post-Katrina service learning at Loyola of New Orleans](#). All three reviews describe campus-community responses to interpersonal, regional, and environmental challenges.

My summer graduate course at Auburn University titled “[Environmental Rhetoric, Ethics, and Policy](#)” began with a series of interesting questions: students wanted to know what they could do about public policy and how they could possibly have any sort of social influence. The course, designed to foster civic engagement and teach elements of technical writing, such as audience awareness and conveyance of *ethos*, encouraged students to “learn their world” (the tagline from my [course advertisements](#)) in a whirlwind 10 classes with 15 students. By the time they finished, students were to be able to:

- * Demonstrate an awareness of ethics in relation to environment-related situations and circumstances
- * Analyze and discuss image events, activism, and the rhetoric of environment-related politics

- * Analyze and discuss the rhetorical situation in relation to environment-related policy
- * Discuss the policy-making process and the role of an engaged public
- * Apply theory towards application in shaping public policy related to environment-related communication.

This last point, “apply theory,” caused some initial consternation, and excitement, in the class. Within minutes of our first meeting students knew they would be attempting to influence actual public policy.

In the interest of helping my students influence public policy, I designed my summer class to work with three concepts I see as valuable for the civic-minded teacher: pseudotransactionality, expertise, and critical engagement. In this essay, I’ll provide an overview of my intent for the class, then use our experiences with these elements¹ as a vehicle to explore what it means to teach civic engagement, an idea my students immediately processed as “activism.”

My plans for the first day of the class were to introduce the syllabus, start a discussion on “the environment” based on my own research, and then work through Wanda Martin and Scott Sander’s discussion of public policy in the classroom. Before we even got to the attendance policy, however, students were wrestling with an entire semester’s worth of work: they



wanted to know how they could make a difference, how to get their voices heard. Students noted their concern about being labeled activists, about seeming like imposters.

We were on the right track, and we had a lot of work to do.

Service Learning and Civic Engagement at Auburn University

Our work in the class proceeded as an extension of the outreach philosophy at Auburn University. Service learning—using the classroom to reflect on community interaction—and civic engagement—engaging in social acts which strive to positively influence the community—are important parts of the university’s educational process. As a land-grant institution, Auburn is committed to serving the community, a concept that forms the basis for our [mission statement](#). Our Office of Public Service, through its “[Auburn Serves](#)” portal, notes “Auburn University has a mission of Outreach—engaging its expertise in the community to improve the quality of life for citizens. Auburn encourages students to take an active role in the outreach mission.” This site provides resources to help students engage with their world and help faculty learn how to foster civic engagement.

Individual colleges at Auburn also encourage service learning and civic engagement. The College of Liberal Arts, for example, hosts a [Summer Academy](#) designed to help faculty “who are interested in incorporating civic engagement/service learning practices in their courses and learning how to integrate outreach into their teaching and research.” In addition,

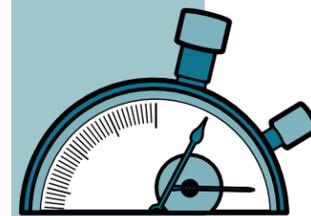
numerous individual courses help students learn by encouraging (or requiring) civic engagement in the form of volunteering, client projects, and community partnerships, among other activities.

Environmental Rhetoric, Ethics, and Policy: A Class Overview and Justification

Civic engagement is a critical part of any class which intendeds to prepare students for an active role in society. My summer course, a five-week intensive marathon of reading, discussion, and writing, was designed to engage students through civic engagement and ethics-based decision-making à la Paul Dombrowski’s statement that “[w]hat we write does have consequences, and we must accept responsibility for our words” (12). Assignments were split into two sections: ethics scenarios and a written public comment module.

Early in the class students responded to environmental ethics scenarios, such as those described on [David Keller’s Environmental Ethics studies site](#). Then, in groups, students created their own scenarios² and individually responded to each other’s posed problems. These assignments and associated lectures and discussions were designed to provoke an awareness of expertise, complexity, and a sense of real-world problems before moving toward the four-part final project.

The final project began with a proposal, transitioned to the construction of an informational report, and culminated with a written public comment that had to be both



submitted to an outside decision-maker and presented in class.³ I chose this form of engagement because it culminated in work directly engaging with outside audiences while still allowing time for teacher and peer feedback. Many students actually began their research process by contacting decision-makers to determine an appropriate course of action, and some stayed in contact with the decision-making agency and associated contacts throughout the entire project.

My pedagogical model for the class stemmed from Wendell Berry’s words in “Think Little”: “I would rather go before the government with two people who have a competent understanding of an issue, and who therefore deserve a hearing, than with two thousand who are vaguely dissatisfied” (84). To extend Berry’s concepts, this class considered civic responsibility as the kind of “active citizenship” Dubinsky advocates in his examination of the “[Land-Grant Way](#),” and what Martin Gregory seems to intend with his call to “help students acquire capacities of heart and mind” (39) in his reflection on teaching empowered students.

Pseudotransactionality: Educating Community Intellectuals Through Audience Awareness

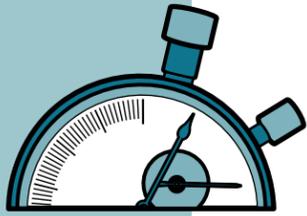
In order to teach an awareness of civic engagement and rhetoric in action, I designed class projects to consider issues of pseudotransactionality, defined by Spinuzzi as the problem of writing “patently designed by a student to meet teacher expectations” (337),⁴ and to motivate real projects with which the students felt a true

investment. In pseudotransactions, students design writing to meet pedagogical objectives. As Spinuzzi notes, “Resulting versions of the genre have evolved to accomplish the goals of a specific classroom rather than those of the workplace that the classroom supposedly emulates” (343).

The problem of teaching in a way that avoids pseudotransactionality is twofold. First, work produced for class must be graded, and “although teachers may be able to spot the characteristics of pseudotransactionality in a particular document, they might not be able to accurately predict what writing strategies will work better” in non-educational contexts (Spinuzzi 343). Second, true avoidance of pseudotransactionality means that student documents must exit the classroom and engage with their intended audience. This creates the danger of a student sending a document, which, even after extensive editing and teacher feedback, still fails in its objectives. I feel that benefits outweigh the risks, as the anxiety associated with sending a document motivates attention to detail and awareness of rhetorical structuring, which enforces awareness of the rhetorical construction of expertise and authority.⁵

Expertise: Establishing the Right to be Heard

Establishing expertise is hard work for any member of the public. For public policy to be made or changed in a democratic society, a decision-maker must recognize a contributor’s right to speak. As Helga Nowotny notes in “Democratising



Expertise and Socially Robust Knowledge," "The question of whose knowledge is to be recognized, translated, and incorporated into action has been exacerbated under pressure for democratization" (152). Democratization in science-relation decision-making leads to its own set of problems, however, as established by H.M. Collins and Robert Evans's "The Third Wave of Science Studies," in which they contend that we need more and more effectively defined experts. Brian Wynne's response, in which he notes that "we can agree that expertise is real, but its salience, validity and authority with respect to a public issue are still conditional" ("Seasick" 403) muddies the waters, and further consideration of expertise by Collins and Evans in their 2003 article, "King Canute Meets the Beach Boys," notes that science mixed with politics creates imprecision (435-436). In short, the politicization and rhetorical construction of expertise leaves civic-minded citizens in a difficult situation: to effect change, one must convey expertise and authority, even if one has not dedicated their life to the study of a particular issue.

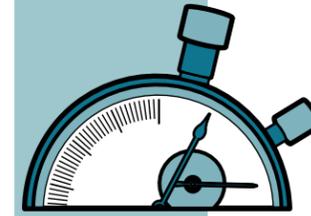
By having students research and write informational reports on an issue they wished to see changed before they actually sent a letter to a decision-maker, I hoped to help students empower themselves with the right to speak while establishing expertise and authority. This led us to discussions of credibility, information management, and citation strategy. I was asked, for example, if a student could use multiple sources from the same overarching website in the report. My response forced me

to work directly with issues of both pseudotransactionality and expertise: "If you get 10 sources from [one government site], you've probably learned a lot, and, numbers-wise, you are not wrong, *per se*, assignment-wise. 10 sources from the same government-sponsored source, however, indicates a strong bias, and won't be accepted by any decision-maker because no triangulation has occurred." This later evolved into a classroom discussion on the power of the informational report as a source of "objective" information where source material creates an argument through placement and internal conversation, rather than from explanation or exposition.

Critical Engagement: Negotiating (and Questioning) Authority

Teaching civic engagement is not just about telling students they need to be involved, but about teaching them how to become involved in a meaningful way that conveys authority.⁶ To complicate matters, engagement may mean offering criticisms of existing policies or expertise to those who are actively engaged in shaping public policy. To this end, we examined the public policy-making process as described by both W. Michele Simmons in *Participation and Power* and Catherine F. Smith in *Writing Public Policy* (both books were read and discussed in their entirety). Smith gave us the groundwork, Simmons gave us complexity. As Smith states early in her book:

Making public policy means deciding what is and is not a problem, choosing which problems to solve, and deciding on solutions.



The process occurs in a political context of pluralism. Problems are conceived and defined differently by variously interested actors. Solutions are achieved through mutual adjustment and adaptation of interests. Decision often demands compromise and reflects institutional constraints. The framework for decision is governmental. (1)

Simmons's work complicates this outline, arguing, "The citizen's status is marked by low interaction with the technical experts as well as little power in influencing the final policy" (122), in part, because, as Thomas G. Goodnight notes, "many forms of social persuasion are festooned with the trappings of deliberation, even while they are designed to succeed by means inimical to knowledgeable choice and active participation" (215). Policy proceedings often hinge on adherence to rules (which may not be made accessible to involved publics) and perceptions of expertise.

Brian Wynne's discussion of Cumbrian sheep farmers⁷ and Tarla Rai Peterson's description of Canadian Aboriginal involvement in policy decisions⁸—both examinations of competing worldviews and models of expertise—led us to issues of local authority. One student noted, for example, that families living on the Gulf Coast have more local expertise on the Gulf oil spill than many of the scientists, simply because they see what is happening every day. Personal experience, however, doesn't often convey a sense of expertise: to be engaged you must take action, but to be heard you must convey authority. This line of reasoning ultimately led

us back to the rhetorical structuring of letters and reports by forcing us to consider how someone who may have limited constructed *ethos* (through degrees, titles, or affiliation) creates a document that is read as a professional and viable addition to the policy-making process.

Conclusion

By creating an environment where students were forced to examine their own professionalism (e.g., "How do we prove we know what we're talking about?") rather than simply discussing it (e.g., "How would you do this if you actually planned to submit a letter?"), we established that access to credible information is critical in influencing public policy.

Perhaps one of the most recurrent themes of the course was the frustration involved in an ethics-based model of critical civic engagement. One evening the students expressed frustration about truthfulness in advertising in response to discussions about agendas and the hidden costs of everything from fossil fuels to hybrid vehicles.⁹ We noted that "T(t)ruth" is complex, and the civic-minded citizen has the at-times-unfortunate burden of keeping informed and ensuring that policymakers hear concerns. Conversely, we also agreed that expedient decision-making may not allow time for public debate or, in a time of crisis, may have no easily adaptable precedent.¹⁰ As Simmons notes, real civic power comes from influencing policy makers *before* policy is made—writing a comment or catching one's senator in the elevator to suggest a course of action that informs their political activities from there on out.

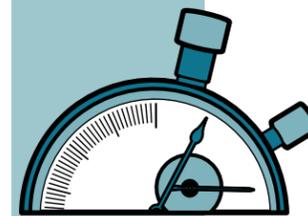


This course encouraged students to become empowered and seek active change in their world while working through issues of pseudotransactionality, expertise, and critical engagement. As students learned the complex footwork involved in dancing with activism, we, as with all courses, encountered numerous problems, from difficulty in obtaining information to determining proper audiences. The course was limited in that we had a very short amount of time in which to work, and real-world constraints, such as potential informants or decision-makers not returning communication, restrictive formatting and space requirements,¹¹ and the at-times unsettling realization that not everyone would agree with students' proposed policy changes, kept us busy. At the same time, what students may have perceived as problems I often saw as important lessons in civic engagement and public rhetoric. Ultimately, these students identified real problems and worked with informants, decision-makers, their teacher, and their peers to strive toward positive change in their world. I hope our class model can help others do the same.

I thank the students who participated in this course for all of your hard work, dedication, and willingness to try to change your world. I also thank Jonathan Arnett and my anonymous reviewers for excellent feedback and suggestions as this article developed.

Endnotes

1. This commentary essay has been approved by Auburn University's IRB Chair. Because of the nature of the course and the identifiability of the students' projects, however, I will avoid discussing specific project details in this essay.
2. Class models came from cases printed in *Intercom* magazine, my own work, and the cases presented in Harris Jr., Pritchard, and Rabin's *Engineering Ethics* text.
3. Students selected projects with which they felt a personal connection. While levels of engagement did vary, most students in the class were easily able to articulate a personal connection to both their research interests and their proposed stance and comment.
4. See also work by Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch and Joseph Petraglia.
5. For better or for worse, my students received both positive and negative responses to their writing. In one case, a student's public comment was poorly received because of issues of tone and presentation we had attempted to solve prior to submission of the document. Conversely, another student received immediate feedback that the identified problem and policy suggestions would be discussed at the next city council meeting, one student's letter was published in a local newspaper, and other received a detailed letter from a senator specifically written in response to the issues raised (not



a form letter). In each case the student initiated the discussion, but lessons learned through negative feedback are admittedly hard to take.

6. As a reviewer of this work noted, there is great value in telling people that they need to be involved in their world. This act of raising awareness can point people toward issues with which they may be unfamiliar, or let people know that their voice is important in a decision-making process. return

7. See "Misunderstood Misunderstanding: Social Identities and Public Uptake of Science."

8. See "Subverting the Culture of Expertise: Community Participation in Development Decisions."

9. Students were surprised to learn about the prevalence of rare earths in "green" products, such as the more than 20 pounds of lanthanum in a Toyota Prius's battery (Folger 138). This conversation evolved into a discussion on the hidden costs associated with production of just about anything. The topic came up again later when we sidetracked onto a discussion of Wendell Berry's 1987 piece "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer," and his rhetorically powerful statement, "I would hate to think that my work as a writer could not be done without direct dependence on strip-mined coal. How could I write conscientiously against the rape of nature if I were, in the act of writing, implicated in the rape?" (112).

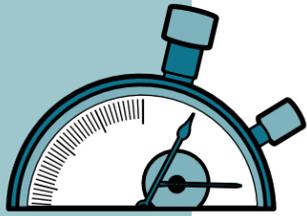
10. See Schwartzman, Ross, and Berube's "Rhetoric and Risk."

11. Some students adapted their public comments for online commentary,

others for newspaper publication (at the behest of the institutions which ultimately published their work). In some instances the allowed formatting or spacing was significantly different from the comment they initially wanted to submit. While problematic, this taught a valuable lesson in adapting work for public consumption.

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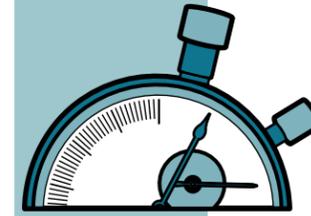
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