

Plowing Fertile Ground in Farmville:

Acknowledging a Rhetoric of Conversation

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This article analyzes the importance of conversation employed by students working with community stakeholders in a civic writing seminar. Acknowledging Lloyd Bitzer's seminal work on the rhetorical situation and Burke's concept of identification provides a strong background of the students' understanding of the civic sphere; however, medieval rhetorician Madeleine de Scudéry's (1683) provocative treatise, "On Conversation," reminds us to expand the arena of civic discourse. Scholar Jane Donawerth's recovery of Scudéry's treatise suggests the power of private discourse as more useful than public rhetoric. This article concludes that theorizing the rhetorical situation alone proves inadequate to energize young rhetors' discourse needed to engage public civic agencies and actors to action.

A university foreign to its city, superimposed on it, is a mind-narrowing fiction.[...] The university that is foreign to its context does not speak it, does not pronounce it.

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, p. 133

Have a conversation—a real conversation—with the friends who make you think, with the family who makes you laugh.

—Eric Schmidt, CEO Google, Boston University Commencement Speech 2012

Public rhetoric, civic writing, and service-learning are among the many dynamic fields of growth for composition studies. In turn, public rhetoric and civic writing are indebted to the scholarship regarding pedagogy of service-learning in the fields of first year composition and professional writing. One of the motivations we share, as Thomas Deans explains in *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*, is “the prospect of students writing for an authentic audience beyond the classroom” (67). Writing for an authentic audience is invaluable work for any course, but in particular, writing seems a given for civic writing courses. Yet, how many students in civic writing or civic engagement courses actually immerse themselves in the audience for whom or to whom they are writing? With the relatively recent focus on writing for civic engagement seen by the growing number of commercially published textbooks for this select field, my concern is students who are left inventing their civic audience entirely.

Recognizing that visiting a civic public sphere is a complex endeavor—How do you locate ‘them’? Who are ‘they’? Is there a centralized ‘them’?—if our civic writing courses don’t find ways to immerse or at least invite our students to meet a civic body or audience, then our pedagogy runs the risks of asking young civic rhetors to invent the audience, never meeting or knowing them outside of digital spaces. While this invention might be a useful exercise for many civic writing classes, do we want to leave our students at such an early stage of enculturation. The focus of this article is a course in which students hosted a dinner with our town council thereby easing the students’ entrance into a foreign discourse community.

THE FERTILE GROUND OF FARMVILLE

Longwood University is located in Farmville, a small rural Southern town, population 8, 216 (when the university is in session) in the heart of Virginia. This community owes it roots to farming, shipping, and history. For years its business was selling tobacco in large mid-19th century warehouses, which now houses a sprawling furniture company. Farmville was a shipping town for goods moving from the mountains by rail and by bateau to port cities. General Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia spent time in Farmville before the surrender in Appomattox. While there was no plundering by Grant’s army or

lasting scars of the Civil War, the next century's civil rights struggle remains a visible presence. On April 19, 1951 Barbara Johns, a black ninth grader in a squalid segregated school, initiated a student strike in protest of the educational inequities. Days later, she wrote a letter to NAACP lawyers, Oliver Hill and Spotswood Robinson, in Richmond, inviting them to Farmville to see the situation. The strike was the first of its kind for educational rights and eventually led to a lawsuit *Davis vs Prince Edward Board of Education* joining other lawsuits resulting in the Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs the Board of Education (Smith)*. However, one action by local civic bodies left a deeper mark on the town. The Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors chose to join the state's Massive Resistance effort against integration. We closed our public schools from 1959 to 1964. The "lost generation of Prince Edward" (Smith) is still recovering from illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment. Today, the school stands preserved as the Robert Russa Moton Museum, at the other end of town.

Our community is a blend of all these histories and haunts with the students literally in a 69-acre triangle at the center of the small town. Its size and location do not correlate to open doors for young eager citizens who live here for roughly eight semesters. From the town's perspective, we might be still be the girls' school on the hill. In 1889, Longwood's first evolution was Farmville Female Seminary Association, a private, religious institution. It offered "English, Latin, Greek, French, and piano. The tuition fees were \$20 for piano, \$15 for higher English, \$12.50 for lower English, and \$5 for each foreign language" (Shackleford, 1955, p.3). By 1884, we shifted our mission to developing white female public school teachers as a State Female Normal School. We were "[t]he first teacher-training institution in Virginia . . . established by the Legislature" (Tabb, 1929, n. p.) Though we now have many more majors in the school in addition to our education department, we can still be seen as the college on the hill. Thus, understanding the audience(s) of these young rhetors began with research about the town and their current and past issues.

THE RHETORIC OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The call to understand audience to produce effective discourse is not a new one. In fact, when considered in light of the history

of composition, courses in writing for the public sphere are quite established. Graduates of the first American universities were required to ‘declaim’ their new knowledge to a public of the classroom, university graduates, or townspeople in speeches given around graduation (Murphy; Berlin; Johannesen). This tradition is a reminder of the early Greek academies of Isocrates, Plato, or even the Sophists, who charged their students with regular practice of public presentation to develop the art of (rhetorical) discourse and eloquence. Lately, American colleges have returned their curricular emphasis to public or civic engagement.

If the original call in composition sprang from Susan Wells’ seminal “Rogue Cops,” this course represents a re-growing call to action in composition to address the needs of students writing beyond the academy (see, e.g., Ervin; Shirley Wilson Logan’s response in 2006 to “What Should College English Be?”; Parks and Goldblatt; Weisser; and Welch, among others). In 2010, Mike Rose made a call for public writing instruction in graduate programs:

We could offer training—through a course or some other curricular mechanism—in communicating to broader audiences, the *doing* of rhetoric. . . . Students would learn a lot about media and persuasion and the sometimes abstract notion of audience. And they would understand rhetoric, the rhetorical impulse and practice, in a way that is both grounded and fresh. (p. 291-292)

The ‘doing’ of rhetoric is perhaps a call that undergraduate and graduate courses have come to know in service-learning, civic writing/engagement, and public rhetoric courses (Coogan; Deans; Herzberg; Rivers and Weber). And many are the calls for higher education to address the needs of their graduates for skills to participate in a healthy democracy (see ADP, AACU, Jacoby and Associates, and the work at Tufts University to name just a few).

My home institution joined this growing trend in 2001 with a mission to build “citizen leaders who are prepared to make positive contributions to the common good of society” (longwood.edu/president/4731.htm) The capstone course (within which dinner arose) was designed to produce rhetorically sound writing for civic

change by third and fourth year students at the precipice of exiting the university. With an eye towards civic issues, students are to work for the common good—writing and speaking for the good of the community.

A unique feature of the course is its interdisciplinary population. As a capstone experience, the course works by imitating the mixed population of a civic body.

No one person is the expert on every issue. Students are invited to contribute knowledge from their newly-found disciplinary expertise, listen deeply to each other, and transform their understanding of a public civic issue with an integrated perspective. This classroom laboratory is designed to model the speaking, listening, and composing of civic knowledge that should happen in any good civic organization.

My approach to staying “grounded and fresh” (using Mike Rose’s phrase), inviting the complexities of community work in this course, is to stay local. In past semesters, I have asked students to start with what they know, their own hometown, or something they have access—to our small college town. Students find a civic public issue to address it, either by advocating for a change or the status quo. This is a complex task but one that I have helped students navigate many times. As you can imagine, these performances—theirs and mine—are quite challenging. Over the years, student rhetors met with varying degrees of success. Some of the projects included encouraging recycling in restaurants, dissuading town officials from demolishing an historic church, soliciting donations of used toys and books for disadvantaged families, and collecting soccer equipment from the local youth soccer league for distribution in South America. Only one of these projects broke through to their stakeholders.

I was frustrated that students didn’t seem to get much ‘done.’ They had researched their chosen civic issue, the stakeholders involved, and the constraints that work for and against the student-rhetor in the issue. As Phyllis Ryder suggests, I moved students from their desks to the street in ways that entertain a study of not only multiple perspectives in public issues but of multiple publics they’ll encounter.

We completed audience analysis grids which required students to label the audiences' motivations, the exigencies as the audiences perceive it, and then what appeals students intended to use in fitting with the grid. I encouraged them to go home and walk the streets to find research not available on a database. Those who chose our town were encouraged to walk the streets, stop by the town manager's office, or talk to people in the local stores.

As for a rhetorical education I initiated in the course, we attended town council meetings analyzing the rhetorical strategies of the speakers and the rhetoric of architecture and place. I held class in downtown spaces—on the sidewalk in front of First Baptist Church, the church Martin Luther King Jr. visited and the basement of which students gathered to organize pickets and protests, the steps of the courthouse that shuttered the schools during Massive Resistance, and students spoke with citizens involved in our Downtown Main Street improvement committee at our local coffee shop.

In one particular exciting case, a group of students, a team of students in nine majors, decided to raise funds for our local Civil Rights Museum and created the video, *Rosa Parks Sat Down and Barbara Johns Stood Up* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRplXttn5xA>). The students researched the museum's history, met with the staff at the museum, and received approval to film the museum after hours. On their own time, they scripted, storyboarded, offered their ideas for class peer review, and shot the film. It was a humbling experience to watch the students energy and enthusiasm. The targeted audience was Oprah Winfrey. But the students' research of Oprah was limited to her autobiographical interview, and the students video was not specifically tailored to Oprah. When this article went to press, the video had only 1,081 views. The distance between audience and rhetor was too large, after all our work on audience. Since this video, the Moton's six galleries have been completed with grant funding.

A few of the other student rhetors with other projects would be heard; some were accepted into meetings with stakeholders, for which they and I were thrilled. "They actually listened to my idea!" "I just met with the superintendent of the county school and the Director of Finance about the grants I researched!" For many students, this

foray into the public, civic sphere seemed to be an exercise, a fruitful one, but just an exercise.

THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

Students' heightened sophistications comes from reading the town as a text, reading town history deeply, and also by starting relationships that begin with 'being there' and 'reading there.' With this importance of 'being there,' I decided to have the entire class focus on our town.

I learned that finding and creating an entry point for civic action is less about inventing a reason to talk to town council and more about understanding stakeholders, constraints of the situation, and listening carefully. Being there, being aware, and entering this rhetorical situation requires more than simply analyzing rhetorical strategies. It takes a relationship, especially when students are to enter the public sphere and 'perform.' One recent event added to the kairotic moment for students to engage with town officials.

In 2011, Farmville was accepted into the Virginia Main Street program. The four points of this program, Organization, Design, Publicity, Economic Restructuring, centered on grassroots efforts to revitalize blighted areas (Robertson). This program had been brought to town by a collective of citizens and business owners who banded together after a series of letters to the local editor in the span of a week the summer of 2010 complaining about vacant storefronts, lack of parking, and the general economic direction of the town (Cook; Jamieson, Johnson et al; Paul; Watson). For the students to understand this bottoms-up approach, we read these letters and a collection of articles about Main Street programs; one in particular helped them see that citizens bringing citizens to the table can be done by facilitating workshops and charettes (Silverman, Taylor, and Crawford). We also read about urban demolition of historic black neighborhoods to make way for urban renewal in the nearby town of Charlottesville (home of University of Virginia) when citizens weren't involved (Herman). Our goals were far more humble than saving historic neighborhoods or facilitating charettes, though I thought about it.

Thus, I began to have the students focus the students more on the discourse and the actors in the town. We studied public policy decisions as they spun out in local town council meetings. We attended monthly civic meetings. The students had a subscription to the local paper to develop a working knowledge of town stakeholders and the context of issues. Stakeholders in this town hold many positions, so it's important to read many parts of the slim paper to see where they appear, especially the reprint of the front page from 50 years ago, which is currently rebroadcasting the closed schools in the county. Learning about stakeholders, we found out the mayor joined the town council in 1976 and has been mayor since 1998. He was also a former fire chief of Farmville. One town council member (deceased recently) was the police chief during Robert Kennedy's visit in the 1960s. The vice mayor, also my postal carrier, is a member of the First Baptist Church on Main Street (which Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy visited). In addition, the vice mayor was denied five years of education during Massive Resistance.

This particular semester, however, became a game-changer. I was introducing the complex relationship of the town and the university to the students as we prepared to attend the town council meeting that night. I informed the students that the town council met in the town manager's office room for dinner before the public meeting, and I had tried to get the previous semester's students into the dinner and was told there wasn't enough room for the students and the council. One student boldly suggested we invite the council members to dinner.

Because I see value in 'doing rhetoric' in addition to using rhetoric for criticism, I told them I would find money for this event if they would go forward with this idea. And they did. They designed the invitations, planned the menu, secured parking, and escorted the members into a private dining room on campus (actually, the oldest dining room in town). The next month we had dinner during which council members were seated with four to five students at their own table. They met civic leaders that night.

They made lasting impressions. In fact, the next week's editorial was about the potential energy from students at Longwood University that is untapped in town.



From the left, Mayor Sydnor Newman, seniors Wynne Walters, Lauren Smiley, Councilman Tommy Pairet, senior Meagan Greene. Picture by Ken Woodley, Editor of Farmville Herald, who was also seated at the table. 9.15.2011

The students were keenly aware of who they were speaking with. However, in many cases, this was the first time they sat face-to-face with a public official. It was the first time they sat for an extended time without asking a favor, suggesting an idea, or merely interviewing that candidate for information. For Lauren Smiley, a future teacher of high school mathematics, dinner was about seeing the town from an emic perspective: “I was able to see another side of Farmville instead of keeping within the bubble of Longwood University. We were able to share experiences we’ve had in Farmville and talk about new ideas we would all like to see for the town of Farmville.” For Blake Jarrell, a psychology major, there were larger implications: “The dinner got me interested in local politics and showed me that getting to know public figures can make long-lasting communication ties.” Some students made connections with town leaders which assisted them in civic projects the rest of the semester.

After the dinner, we attended the town council, and a student used the guest speaker option to thank them formally for their time. At the conclusion of the town council meeting, a council member reinforced the importance of the dinner. The March 9, 2011 minutes read: “Council member Whitus thanked [the] University . . . students

for hosting this evening's dinner. He said the open dialogue was a wonderful idea, and he looks upon it as a way to build stronger ties between the Town and the University" (Hricko). A week and a half later, the town manager of 37 years, Gerald Spates, wrote me a letter stating:

In all the time I have been Town Manager, this was the first time I can remember having such a relaxing event, with such a fine group of young people. I think the Council members enjoyed this dialogue with your students. Your students are very well-informed, and it gave me a sense of satisfaction that our future with students like these, is in good hands.

The following successes in civic engagement represent the students' ideas fertilized and harvested by understanding the town's needs first. This work developed not from students' well-researched, though objectivist interpretations of the town's exigencies as Bitzer suggests, but from their perception of the town's exigencies from the stakeholders' point of view (Grant-Davie) gained by engaging in the relationship-building process of eating and having good conversations.

Five students joined the town Re-Districting Committee voluntarily that night at the town council meeting after hearing town council discuss this work and realizing the importance of this committee to the town and the civic body for future elections. Two students wanted other citizens to know the town council members in a more familiar way. Considering this opportunity to get to know their council and seeing the town website's simple listing of contact info by the picture, they wanted personal and professional information listed in the town website. They interviewed each town council member (a logistical challenge, to say the least because the members' employment ranges from full-time to retired and their ages from 50s to 80s) and wrote brief biographies for the town government website (<http://farmvilleva.com/government/town-council-members>). Those website biographies are up today.

Two other students wanted to increase pedestrian and bike traffic down town to increase spending at small businesses and to attract



potential students to our university. Because the town had spent money on decorative brick and lights for downtown, they knew the town wanted more foot traffic. After they met with the town manager, they researched pedestrian traffic patterns to suggest places for bike racks. The students advised him on locations for bike racks downtown, making a map to mark the locations for future committee discussions.

Some of those bike racks are in place today. This one centered in the photo is placed by the old railroad station which welcomes pedestrians and horses on a new rails-to-trails system.

Finally, one student made a motion in the student government association (SGA) legislative committee to have a student member regularly attend the town council to maintain another line of communication between the students and the town. During this student's successful run for SGA President, one of his initiatives was to strengthen the students' ties with the town. While there isn't a student representative currently at town council meetings, the SGA President did experience success later. The following winter students vandalized property by setting fire to a couch in the middle of a snow-covered street. A local fire engine got stuck in the snow while attempting to leave one emergency scene to attend to this one. This

action cost the town money and damaged the university's reputation with the town. The SGA President sent a letter of apology to his previous invitee, the Town Manager Gerald Spates. The letter was warmly received (and well-written).

THE MEDIEVAL CONNECTION

Because the civic projects developed so easily, my assumption was that something must explain the phenomenon. Chancing upon medieval rhetorician Madeline de Scudéry for another research project helped to unpack the power of that night.

Writing from inside 17th century French court, Scudéry's rhetoric of conversation addressed a new vision of political power as private rather than exclusively public. She knew from being privy to the French court and as a woman operating within the salons of the day that there was much potential in the quiet interplay of conversation. Furthermore, she knew the fatal consequences of speaking imprudently in the public spheres of France and Italy. While one might draw parallels between the collective political power in medieval France and the collective power of a few hands in our town (we do have a sister city in France), it is certainly not fatal to speak publicly! And yet, it is certainly true that in a small Southern town, friendly conversation can go as far as noble birth or the public rhetoric of landed gentry.

Private conversation has power because it was and is a site of rhetorical skill involving the canons of invention, memory, arrangement, style, and most importantly delivery (Donawerth 310). We learn from Scudéry that conversation well-managed means changing the content and style according to audience. This maintenance will do more to serve the subject at hand than speaking too much or too little. Agreeing that it is impossible to come up with rules for good conversation, she does allow for some principles whose application is subject to the rhetorical situation.

Thus the Conversation ought to be equally natural and rational; though I must say on some occasions, that the Sciences must be brought in on a good grace, and that agreeable follies may

likewise have their place, provided they be agreeable, modest and gallant. Inasmuch as to Speak with reason, we may for certain affirm, that there is nothing that may be said in Conversation, in case it be manag'd with Wit and Judgment, and the party considers well where he is, and to whom he Speaks, and who he is himself. (Bizzell and Herzberg 772)

Scudéry's description of the complicated civic sphere in private conversation is, I argue, what juniors and seniors are ready for. While it may sound simplistic to suggest they are ready for conversation, to embed their civic concerns carefully within a conversation is a new skill. They have been prepared by the academy to deliver information, less to engage an audience, less to negotiate this material in a more intimate setting.

And in fact, this conversation was a kairotic moment in their academic careers. As Emily Engelking, a pre-service elementary school teacher, wrote: "[W]e were able to break down barriers and get to know each other over a common thread . . . our stomachs. It was an opportunity to learn who the people of Town Council are as well as for them to learn who we are as people vs. just students." The common thread these dinner partners shared was the civic mission of the town. After an education about the town, Emily's rhetorical education was polished and mobilized to meet and get to know civic leaders. In line with Scudéry's advice coincidentally, we avoided harping on the negative or extolling the virtues of the inconsequential like 'clothing or poorly-behaved children.' She suggested that good conversation can lighten the room, encourage good will, and reinvigorate those engaged.

We repeatedly stressed to town council members—and they asked—there was no agenda for the dinner. We were simply getting to know our town council. We were not there to "speak strictly according to the exigency of [our] Affairs" (Bizzell and Herzberg 767). We were there to learn more about them, to start a relationship—"to Speak in general, it ought oftener to be of common and gallant things, than of great Transactions" (772). In many cases, this was the first time students sat face-to-face with a public official. Caitlin Volchansky, a kinesiology and exercise science major, expressed an appreciation

for meeting members of the town and understanding the town from an emic perspective, “It was neat to get a policymaker perspective of the town we go to school in. By creating these ties, we’ve been learning so much about Farmville that we never knew.” Like Emily, she also spoke of an appreciation to act without the screen of the school or a professor, “For once, we were given the opportunity to directly communicate with the people of Farmville.” It was during this dinner that students transformed from student to citizen.

Scudéry’s assertion is that Conversation ought to be studied as we do books. Her point is that conversation functions as a book-learning “introducing into the world, not only Politeness, but also the purest Morals, and the love of Glory and Vertue” (Bizzell and Herzberg 767). Glory and virtue may have been a stretch during our dinner with town council, but it did invigorate the course. Had we digressed into complaints or engaged a hidden agenda, we may not have achieved our goal of establishing relationships with civic actors. From that dinner came such good will that we met Scudéry’s claim of the civilizing effect of conversation. Our goal was pure Scudéry in that we had the sophistic goal of pleasing our audience (Donawerth 309). In this semester, dinner shortened the distance between rhetor and audience. This activity facilitated better production of writing and speaking for social change and, interestingly enough, is supported by the work of a medieval rhetorician.

IMPLICATIONS

All projects in this civic writing course required students to write for audiences outside the classroom. This “transactional writing” (Petraglia; Spinuzzi), writing that does what it is to do, pushes students to enter contexts with audiences that will receive the work rather than create writing for academic exercise, though exercise is vitally important. I have always required students to produce transactional writing. This time their work actually did what it was intended to do, and my conclusion is that it was helped by the power of conversation and connection.

In the following semesters, this dinner has become a standard part of my syllabus. Placed in the opening weeks of the semester, this dinner has become one of the methods of placing students in the

civic, public sphere. Additionally, they read the bi-weekly local paper. We walk downtown to examine the town as a text, and they are encouraged to think of the visual and material rhetoric of the town scene from *their* perspective and a *resident* perspective. We attend each town council meeting, tour the local Robert Russa Moton Museum, and attend another local citizen group meeting. All of this to get them ready to write. At times, I question how much time outside the classroom should be given over within an advanced writing seminar. But for students to move to a citizen-subject position, there must be significant foot work, literally.

Currently, I include the readings of Scudéry to explicitly teach the rhetoric of conversation. We discuss the application of the rhetoric of conversation to rhetorical situations of any duration or location as they meet people in town or on campus. After all, when they enter the town to address civic issues, they have learned through their reading of the local paper and visiting other civic meetings that talking to one person in this town is talking to an invisible history connected by many invisible ties to many other individuals. It's a lesson I hope they carry with them as the boundaries of town and gown are blurred here and when they enter their chosen home and work communities.

David Coogan's argument in "*Service Learning and Social Change: The Case for Materialist Rhetoric*" is that the work of service learning is not just about "rhetorical activism." I would extend the same principle to the work of civic engagement. As he says, it's about "rhetorical scholarship in the public sphere: a challenge to test the limits of rhetorical theory in the laboratory of community-based writing projects in order to generate new questions for rhetorical theory, rhetorical practice, and rhetorical education" (607). In this article, my aim was to explore the power of conversation for civic engagement—doing rhetoric—and to highlight the need for remembering the power of conversation in a rhetorical education. I conclude the experience and the article with the assertion that creating a personal connection among student rhetors and their stakeholders is well-advised. Personal connection is not a guarantee of success, but making space in our syllabi for conversation 'filled

with Wit and Judgment' may help students' rhetorical education reach a satisfactory end.

Currently, I am putting this new emphasis to work within a different issue in town: hunger. After examining the town demographics, I realized we have a larger issue with hunger than you see at first glance. Of the 8, 216 mentioned previously as the population, almost 3, 000 in the census count are Longwood students. If those living below the government's poverty threshold in Farmville is 34.6% (US Census Bureau 2010), then in reality that number is much higher. As such, sixty percent of our elementary school citizens are on free or reduced lunch. Having focused students on the complexity of hunger, who shall we dine with then?

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