

PART II

Rhetoric Across the Disciplines

Rhetoric, Disciplinarity, and Fields of Knowledge

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Does rhetoric, as Plato had Gorgias claim, have other areas of knowledge under its control? Or, as his Socrates claimed, does rhetoric have no use for knowledge at all? Gorgias seems to concede the point but counts it an advantage rather than a deficiency of rhetoric: “But is this not a great comfort, Socrates, to be able without learning any other arts but this one to prove in no way inferior to the specialists?” (Plato, trans. 1961, p. 459c). This critique of rhetoric mounted in the early part of the *Gorgias* relies on a sharp distinction between knowledge and opinion, holding that those who are learned about medicine, say, or about music or numbers, can produce knowledge in others through the use of persuasion but that those who are learned only about rhetoric can produce only opinion, or belief.

We begin with this well-known (if artificially staged) altercation to emphasize that the relationship between rhetoric and knowledge has been under question for quite some time. Plato’s representation of this issue in the *Gorgias* is apparently the beginning of the conceptualization of rhetoric in relation to other bodies of knowledge (Schiappa, 1991). As such, it also marks the beginning of the notion of “disciplinarity”—of the conviction that knowledge must be systematic, methodical, and self-conscious and that such knowledge is shared among those who devote themselves to its acquisition and testing, that is, among experts. Thus, according to Edward Schiappa, Plato’s apparent coining of the term *rhetorikê* in the *Gorgias* indicates that the verbal art of political speakers in the assembly and the law courts had emerged as a practice that aimed to be a “discipline” (p. 40). Plato’s brief was that rhetoric could never measure up to the requirements of a true discipline.

Plato's effort to restrain the Gorgianic ambitions of rhetoric, to make of it at best a supplement, a secondary handmaid to knowledge, and at worst a practice with reckless disregard for knowledge has been enormously persuasive to subsequent thinkers. The verbal arts are contained by the insistence on the distinction between opinion and knowledge, a distinction that posits rhetoric-free pathways to knowledge. Michael Leff (1987) puts the distinction as a metonymy: The historically prevailing view has been that rhetoric is "a thing contained . . . an art domiciled within the territory of politics and domesticated by this political confinement." (p. 1) The view that Gorgias defended so inadequately in Plato's dialogue, a view that has come around again in the neo-Sophistic movement, is that rhetoric is a container, or "a containing force." "Unfettered by any particular subject matter, rhetoric becomes a power that ranges across the entire domain of human discourse, containing whatever matter it encounters" (p. 1). Leff calls these two versions of rhetoric the restrained and the liberated. They have elsewhere been called simply little and Big rhetoric (Schiappa, 2001), or traditional and "globalized" rhetoric (Gaonkar, 1997).

The contemporary movement that helped to liberate rhetoric and has made it possible to include in this *Handbook* a section on rhetoric and the disciplines holds that rhetoric is "epistemic," a claim first made by Robert Scott (1967). This line of thought challenges the Platonic distinction between knowledge and opinion (and thus the general classical distinction between rhetoric and dialectic). Scott's thesis has been the subject of much debate: Harpine points out that it has been taken to mean anything from the ontological claim that rhetoric creates reality to the minimally controversial notion that knowledge is posited, tested, and modified through rhetorical interactions among interested parties (Harpine, 2004). Although Barry Brummett (1990) declared the epistemic thesis dead in 1990 and Scott (1990) himself acknowledged that it was not the heart of the point he had been trying to make, Schiappa (2001) observes that in one form or another it has become embedded in the general assumptions of many rhetorical scholars who came of age after the 1960s, part of the intellectual background that has "liberated" or "globalized" rhetoric.

Two additional developments that serve as premises to this line of work were enabled by viewing rhetoric as epistemic, the appearances of "rhetoric of inquiry" and of "rhetoric of science." The notion of a rhetoric of inquiry developed in the 1980s at the University of Iowa as a rubric under which denizens of different specialized fields could talk about the modes of arguments and persuasion within their respective fields as well as explore rhetorical strategies that different communities of inquiry may have in common. The terrain of interest would include but not be limited to the sciences. It would also include the humanities, the social sciences, and professional fields such as law. Broadly speaking, it undertook to explore the discourses of knowledge, particularly their generative dimensions—in philosophical terms, they were more interested in the context of discovery than in the context of justification (Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987; Simons, 1990). The rhetoric of science shares many of the same concerns, but with a focus on the internal practices of the sciences as well as their public manifestations. For many, rhetorical engagement with science was licensed by Thomas Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which argued that the historical development of scientific disciplines was not governed by logic but influenced by psychology and argumentation. The rhetoric of science was seen by its early practitioners as the interesting "hard case" for epistemic rhetoric that paved the way for inquiry into other less epistemically privileged disciplines (Gross, 1990). Many of the contributions to this literature are discussed in Jeanne Fahnestock's chapter in this volume (Chapter 10). As with any significant development in the field, the rhetoric of science has stirred controversy. A lively discussion of what happens to the idea of rhetoric once it is "globalized" to

cover bodies of specialized knowledge occurs in the set of essays edited by Gross and Keith (1997). Among the themes taken up by the various authors in that volume is the commitment of traditional rhetoricians to civic discourse, and the possibility that using rhetoric as a hermeneutic for exploring the sciences would be at the cost not only of that commitment but of a robust conception of rhetoric itself. Dilip Gaonkar (1997) triggers this extended debate by maintaining that the rhetoric that is everywhere is a “thin” and less useful rhetoric.

The relationship between rhetoric and the disciplines must take account not only of knowledge but also of the other term of the power-knowledge pair. Foucault has taught us that power constitutes knowledge; and long before that, Bacon argued that knowledge should be in the service of power. Rational enterprises, as Toulmin (1972) characterized them, have both cognitive and social dimensions; that is, disciplines are political arenas. Thus, our understanding of the relationship between rhetoric and knowledge must include not only rhetoric’s epistemic qualities but also the social, historical, and political dimensions of knowledge and its construction and dissemination. These dimensions are both internal, as knowledge experts vie with one another for priority, allies, and influence on the intellectual content of the discipline, and external, as disciplines and subdisciplines compete for public attention, resources, and influence.

Before turning to the chapters themselves, we need to call attention to four general issues that seem especially pertinent to the relationship between rhetoric and special fields of knowledge and provide part of the relevant background. One cluster of issues that arises concerns the relative incommensurability of different disciplinary discourses. The issue of incommensurability, famously articulated by Kuhn (1962), was extensively examined by rhetoricians in a very useful volume edited by Randy Allen Harris (2005) titled *Rhetoric and Incommensurability*. This issue is always part of the tacit understanding of those who study rhetoric within specialized disciplines. Rhetoric trades on the lingua franca of interpretive communities. For there to be any communication between disciplinary communities, some such common language must either be antecedently available or constructed on the job. This is equally true of any disciplinary inquiry that aspires to influence public discourse. Such linguistic intercourse is not without its risks.

A second general issue concerns the role of expertise. In thinking about how specific fields of knowledge intersect with public discourse, it should be recognized that a pivotal role is often played by the expert. The familiar rhetorical genres in which expertise goes public, so to speak, would include testimony before political or regulative bodies, published letters to the public from concerned scientists, and consultation and advice to filmmakers and novelists. Thinking about expertise within a rhetorical frame makes it clear that an expert should be defined not just by what they know but by what they do in the name of their own expertise. On this model, expertise would be thought of, not just as a relationship between a specialist and a field of knowledge, but also as a relationship between the specialist and different audiences, in terms of shared linguistic resources, availability, and rhetorical ethos. It would also include what Collins and Evans (2007) call interactional expertise, a capacity to deploy the language of a specialty—a capacity not closely tied to expertise in the specialized field. This, of course, is a kind of rhetorical expertise.

There is no doubt that scientific claims can enter many, if not most, of the areas within which public deliberation occurs. To the extent that this occurs, one could simply relegate them to the category of “inartistic proofs,” in the Aristotelian sense—something like introducing a knife in a murder trial. But what this ignores is the ways in which the rhetoric of science intermingles with public discourse. Bringing scientific “evidence” to bear on a matter of public interest is not so simple as producing a knife. In fact, very often the contribution of science is to establish by disciplinary criteria whether the object before us is what it appears to be. This becomes

problematic, and rhetorically interesting, when the assumptions of the relevant science differ from those of the audience who is trying to incorporate the expert knowledge. For instance, there are neuroscientists who, as expert witnesses, can testify that the idea that people act on the basis of intentions is an illusion, a claim that runs counter to our common sense about human action. This means that our relationship to experts, who not infrequently contradict common sense, is a complicated one.

Generally speaking, we want experts to be “on tap but not on top” when expertise is brought to bear on matters of public concern, which implies that expertise plays a subordinate role in matters of public deliberation (McGee & Lyne, 1987). But it can also play a subordinating role, sometimes to the point of closing down public deliberation. In addition, experts often have the opportunity to affect public discourse through nonpublic or semipublic means through activity in “backstage” areas that occupy a middle ground between the public forums and the expert journals and laboratories. For example, expert influence is exerted on Congressional staffers, on the selection process of review committees, on the construction of executive summaries to government reports. These roles and forums are less visible and less available to the public (and to rhetorical scholars) but affect how specialized knowledge and expertise are brought to bear on public issues (Miller, 2005).

A third set of issues concerns the way in which scientific language and scientific claims chain out across disciplines and across cultures. As science seeks public “understanding,” it also runs the risk of becoming captive to a popular rhetoric, that is to say, to the politically inflected deployments of scientific terms and concepts beyond their contexts of origin. This risk is sometimes welcomed, as for instance, when scientists warn the public about “catastrophic” climate change in hopes that a prudent response might be forthcoming. Once available to a wider public, however, the rhetoric of a given science is no longer under the control of the scientists. And, it seems fair to say, unintended consequences can surprise even the brightest minds. Because any terministic development within a discipline can in principle become the inspiration for public discourse, the relationship between disciplinary and nondisciplinary (or interdisciplinary) usage warrants the attention of civic-minded rhetoricians.

Rhetoricians usually feel most comfortable in the spaces of civic and cultural life and may be reluctant to take on the internal discourse of a natural science or other discipline outside their own. This is quite understandable. They may also find it difficult to locate, access, and interpret backstage material. Yet those who do go looking there have found that the rhetorical strategies and tropes in the disciplines are not in principle different from those found in any other context. Some training in the relevant field is no doubt useful to those who want to cast light on their discursive practices. But one does not necessarily have to “go native” to find promising points of entry. We know, after all, that for all the specificity of disciplines, they draw on the shared pools of language and imagery and argumentative strategy that are available to members of the more general culture. The semiotic flow goes in both directions, and the tropes traverse the walls of disciplinarity. Notions from evolutionary biology, such as “fitness,” or “selfish gene” gain wide currency. Terms used by physicists, such as “Big Bang” or “string theory,” originate in ordinary language, are adopted for specialized use, and then become popular metaphors for the public. The story is similar for many terms from psychology and postmodern literary theory. It would be misleading to say that such terms mean the same thing in the context of the discipline as in the context of public debate; they can be bearers of meaning, nonetheless, and this means that they can have rhetorical significance. In this sense, the language of disciplines is both wide, insofar as

it presupposes the broader culture, and narrow, insofar as it is carefully marshaled in support of disciplinary understandings.

A fourth issue is the contested disciplinary status of rhetoric itself. Some, following Protagoras, prefer to see rhetoric as a “virtue” or native human capacity that, while it may be improved and developed, cannot be a form of expertise. Others have suggested that the globalization of rhetoric, including significantly the rhetorical critique of science and other disciplines, has so attenuated rhetoric as to prevent it from making distinctive or effective contributions to understanding our discursive universe. In this view, if rhetoric aims to be a metadiscipline, able to describe and critique all other disciplines, it becomes less of a discipline itself losing both its identity and its intellectual content. Without its content, rhetoric is a sham discipline, much as Plato charged. Without its distinct identity, rhetoric can’t say anything that can’t be (and hasn’t been) said by psychology, sociology, philosophy, or perhaps literary criticism. More practically, rhetoric as a discipline has been damaged by the material conditions of its academic existence, divided between departments of Communication and English and often also wedged into departments of Classics or History, but at the center of none of these.

Rhetoric’s difficulties as a discipline are reflected in its teaching, one of the most basic responsibilities of any discipline. In English departments, rhetoric was for a long while relegated to introductory courses in writing, which some even regarded as remedial. In Communication departments, where rhetoric has been taught by scholars to advanced students, theory and criticism are commonly disconnected from practice. Courses in practical rhetoric, at both introductory and advanced levels and in both departments, have long been taught primarily by marginal faculty, many of them not scholars, or scholars of rhetoric. The recent pedagogical movements that have disseminated rhetoric across the disciplines—*Writing in the Disciplines*, *Writing Across the Curriculum*, *Communication Across the Curriculum*—reprise the debate between Gorgias and Socrates: Does rhetoric have a subject matter? Can the rhetorician have sufficient subject-matter knowledge to be effective? Must rhetoric be a supplement to the other disciplines?

The six chapters presented in this part vary considerably with respect to the metaphors they use and the direction of their interests. We selected authors and topics to represent a range of disciplines, from the traditional academic areas, such as the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences, to the more open range of interdisciplinary fields, to the discourses of public policy and medicine, in which the specialized and the nonspecialized are in constant contact. Disciplines have their own rhetorical idioms and practices, and these may be studied in their own right. Additionally, disciplines are brought by relations of power or by rhetorical invention into contact with other discourse communities, be they other disciplines or a broader public. The authors represented here consider these various possibilities, ranging from the internal discourse of physics to the application-oriented rhetoric of foreign policy studies.

Jeanne Fahnestock’s chapter (Chapter 10) on rhetoric in the natural sciences could be seen as a sort of a *fortiori* argument; that is to say, if a rhetorical perspective can be of value even within the natural sciences, then it follows that it will be of value in the humanities and social sciences. Fahnestock sketches out the case for taking seriously the notion of rhetoric in the natural sciences. In the course of doing so, she has admirably organized various strands of scholarship. Her overview of the literature is enriched by her own work on “figures of thought” in the sciences, a phrase that creates a bridge between rhetorical invention and cognition. Moreover, it constructs that bridge within the context of the natural sciences.

Don Bialostosky (Chapter 12) turns our attention to recent historical trends within the field of literary theory and criticism, where “rhetoric” was a rubric favored by two very different schools of thought. In looking for a fresh way to think of rhetoric as method, he wants to get beyond the “vertiginous irony” of deconstructive criticism and, like Wayne Booth, longs for a more stable but perhaps more modest footing. Specifically, he wants to find a way of doing literary criticism that captures the most basic forms of human interaction. And he finds an answer in a modification of Bakhtin’s dialogic approach to action. This comports with Fahnestock’s move to characterize the “figures of thought” as “interactional devices,” and turns attention toward the repertoire of interactive performance. He draws the radical conclusion that what follows from this redefinition of figures of thought is that all secondary genres, including all literary genres, are composed of a more basic set of primary genres. Thus, he offers us a limited number of building blocks that are nevertheless capable of capturing the panoply of human interactions. And in the course of it he absolves those of us whose eyes glaze over when exotically named “figures” are catalogued. Contesting the very meaning of rhetoric and the nature of its methods is a perennial part of the rhetorical tradition. If Bialostosky is right, the use of rhetoric in literary criticism and theory has passed through a period of “confident monism” and now has an opening for something that is at once more elemental and more compatible with the performative strand of the rhetorical tradition. It would also become more conversant with the range of human interaction generally, and would rely less on obscure terminology.

Whereas Bialostosky’s focus is on interaction, Edward Clift’s is on its economic counterpart, exchange. Clift’s chapter (Chapter 11) on the rhetoric of economics argues that the body of work that looks at the field of economics through a rhetorical lens has reached a kind of critical mass, such that it invites reconsideration of the basic category of the economic. In *The Rhetoric of Economics*, Deirdre McCloskey (1985), first looked at the discipline of economics as a field of argument and persuasion, and this very notion has inspired subsequent rhetorical readings of “the dismal science.” McCloskey’s original position was that economists who better understand their own rhetoric will become better at their own discipline. But she has also held that a large portion of the real economy is composed of linguistic exchanges that are, in a broad sense, processes of persuasion. Taking the latter point seriously, Clift makes an unexpected move between the world of neoclassical economics and post-structural notions of exchange and allocation, and then cashes it out by doing an economic/rhetorical reading of *The Sopranos*. This move provides a kind of “perspective by incongruity” that in effect treats the fields of rhetoric and economics as interchangeable. And at that point, the rubric might be “rhetoric of economics.”

Julie Thompson Klein (Chapter 15) has provided an account of how rhetoric operates in interdisciplinary exchange and development. Examining Women’s Studies as a case example of an interdisciplinary field, she explores its relationship to antecedent fields and to “boundary objects” that facilitate interaction among established fields in the construction of a new field. Her remarks apply as well to other examples of interdisciplinary fields, such as American studies and composition studies. Moving beyond examples, Klein examines the rhetoric of the self-conscious literature on interdisciplinarity itself: the recurrent metaphors and topoi, the “terministic screens” that have been used in understanding how new knowledge and new modes of knowledge production emerge and how they become organized into what we recognize as disciplines, or protodisciplines. In following the discussions about disciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity, she illustrates the operations of power in the domain of intellectual relations: the search for status and legitimation, the construction of boundaries, the claims for innovation or system.

Gordon Mitchell (Chapter 14) has concentrated on how the field of foreign policy studies might be reshaped by the mounting evidence that rhetorical efforts can pay off mightily in facilitating changes in international relations. Thus, his focus is less on the internal rhetorical operations of a discipline than on its topicalization of rhetoric as a matter that affects the conduct of foreign policy and its relations among nations. By examining the underappreciated role that rhetorical interventions played in ending the Cold War, Mitchell finds evidence that the academic field's orientation toward policy "realism" is in need of correction. He argues that foreign policy studies will have more relevance and explanatory power if they embrace the substantive role that rhetoric plays in shaping international relations.

Judy Segal (Chapter 13) helps us see the general shape of the emerging field of the rhetoric of medicine. With health care and medicine taking on a rapidly increasing share of the economy, the increasing stakes involved in "selling" medical products and services, the reorientation of many social and personal issues toward medicalization, and the escalating demands of the aging baby boomers, there is an increasing need to understand the rhetoric attending and facilitating these changes. Segal shows us how medicine as a professional discipline can be interrogated rhetorically: what kinds of texts and objects are of interest, what methods of inquiry are used, and what kinds of scholars are doing this work and why. Health is both a personal and a public policy concern, and medicine is both a multidiscipline and a powerful professional practice. Inquiry in these areas thus encounters multiple issues of power, interaction, value, privacy, expertise, and the like—all rich territory for the rhetorician.

Together, these six chapters present multiple ways of thinking about the relationship between the universe of public discourse that rhetoric traditionally explores and the specialized discourses represented by the disciplines. To think about this general theme metaphorically, we can envision the latter as islands, each providing habitat for its own ecology and evolution, and each capable of being understood only in its own terms. Given such a picture, it would make sense for rhetoricians to visit these habitats and record the inhabitants' ways of arguing and persuading, their use of tropes and figures, and their configuration of audiences to be addressed. Or maybe, instead, they should be conceptualized as specific locales on a continent, each with its own "dialect" or terminology and ways of doing business, but still a reflection of a more expansive social reality. Viewing the matter that way, it would make sense to begin with generally familiar rhetorical forms and track down the variations that occur within specific locales. Or perhaps we could think of the inhabitants of disciplines as ethnicities among the discourse of knowledge, not confined to particular locales but having a recognizable style. By shifting our metaphor, we shift the nature of the rhetorician's task. There is no default position in approaching the matter, and the chapters that follow bear this out.

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