Rhetoric in Action: The Role of Pedagogy in Rhetoric

Rhetorical pedagogy has been thoroughly detailed in the works of James Berlin, William Covino, Edward Schiappa, Patricia Bizzell, Janet Atwill, and John Poulakos. The aforementioned writers put into perspective the pedagogical aspects of rhetoric in ancient Greece and proffered their potential effects on the teaching and instruction in modern composition and rhetoric. Understanding the importance of the training and learning of rhetoric as the domain of man, the power of language, the means of uniting, and the necessity for truth were brought to our attention 2400 years ago at the hands of Protagoras, Gorgias, and Isocrates. Recently, new scholarship has brought to life new, undiscovered territory on the birth of the Sophists and rhetorical pedagogy through the scholarship of Susan Jarratt, Teresa Morgan, and Deborah Hawhee. Throughout the pantheon of all that has been written about the art of rhetoric and its multifaceted dimensions, this most recent scholarship has shed new light on rhetoric’s historical pedagogical praxis and theory.

The Teacher

Posited by scholars as the first recorded instance of the teacher-student relationship in the training of “rhetoric” is Phoenix’s exhortation to Achilles that he was sent by his father to teach Achilles, not only to teach him the deeds of battle but also, and perhaps most importantly, to teach and instruct him in the speech necessary for “kings and heroes” (Jarratt “Rereading” 82; Morgan 303; Gibson):
...a youngster [Achilles] still untrained for the great leveler, war,
still green at debate where men can make their mark.
So he dispatched me [Phoenix], to teach you all these things,
to make you a man of words and a man of action too. (Homer 9.35-38)

Phoenix’s words reveal the importance of the proper teaching in two very important and necessary skills: “actions” and “words.” His words also shed light on the emphasis of rhetoric in the roles of “kings and heroes” in the ancient world. The great poetry of the Greeks not only contain examples of literary prowess but also “later rhetoricians identified examples of almost every type of rhetoric and every style, argument and arrangement of words in the Illiad and the Odyssey” (Morgan 303). Homer’s positing of Phoenix’s claim of being the teacher Achille’s only tells half of the story of rhetoric. Phoenix, does however, tell us that it was necessary for someone to teach another these requisite skills. Even the great, swift-footed Achilles required instruction and teaching. Although Homer was not forthcoming with a detailed analysis of the pedagogical practices and theories of Phoenix, he left his mark on rhetoric’s significance through these words.

Experiential Learning

In Ancient Greece, the primary method of delivery of instruction after primary education was through oral delivery from a teacher to a student: usually an older pedagogue and a young boy (Freeman 157-8; Jarratt Rereading 82). Perhaps the first method of pedagogical practice and the spread of instructing others were the invention and use of the handbook, or technical rhetoric. “Technical rhetoric grew out of the needs of democracies in Syracuse and Athens, and it remained primarily concerned with public address” (Kennedy 14). The need for written instruction in rhetoric to help individuals defend themselves in court became needed and may
have originated from the “first practitioners” and “early writers of handbooks” of rhetoric (Bizzell 21; Kennedy Art 58; Gagarin 276-7): “Another tradition claims that Corax and Tisias collaborated in writing a handbook on how to win court cases for the recovery of property confiscated under Syracuse’s recent Tyrants” (Morgan 304). Not only did they give students portions of speeches to analyze, but they also instructed their pupils to discover the arguments use them. Corax and Tisias’ surviving cases are the “three Tetralogies of Antiphon” and were used as teaching models for instruction. Corax’s sample court cases allowed students to utilize a predetermined set of questions and then to act them out and “argue for and against them” “from probability” (Morgan 307; Guthrie 178). This first documented pedagogical model of learning to argue through the action of practicing argument on court cases is still a valid method of instruction: experiential learning.

Mimetic Action

Experiential learning was not the only method employed by the early teachers in ancient Greece. “During the mid- to late fifth century, a competing approach to the purely technical teaching of rhetoric appeared through the teaching practices of the Older Sophists: Students learned rhetoric primarily imitating exemplary speeches” (Schiappa Beginnings 6). Sophists employed the learning method of imitation to instruct their pupils on the skills of rhetoric. This newfound method was sparked as a result of many of the founding fathers of Sophism.

Protagoras’ redefining of the logos of human knowledge fueled the Sophists’ movement. Within the framework of Protagoras’s “man is the measure” and that knowledge was not a mystical “muthos,” opened the door for those skilled in the art of rhetoric to make their way to Athens to teach (Schiappa Protagoras 54). This new avenue of knowledge allowed the Sophists both the belief and the confidence to begin teaching others. Knowledge was now within the grasp
and sphere of mankind, now available to more than a select few (Gibson 287; Johnstone 273). Through this new transferable logos, and the subsequent rejection of muthos, the Sophists brought logos from the Heraclitean sphere of “powerful mover” or “spiritual orderer” down out of “the clouds” and into the hands of man (Crick 26-7; Johnstone 273; Hoffman 46). Whether logos as defined by the Sophists constitutes rhetoric has been questioned, so has the “comprehensive term” logos (Schiappa Protagoras 54). This discovery launched the Sophists into the city of Athens to begin to teach their pupils that they could now control and wield logos for themselves.

Gorgias’ works are said to be works created by Gorgias for the purpose of imitation by his students: “Gorgias’s teaching method was to make pupils memorize specimen speeches, or sections of speeches, and two examples survive of speeches which may be such specimens: the Encomium of Helen and the Defence of Palamedes (Morgan 304). Gorgias’ logos (speech, magic words) is also a key component in his rhetoric and training. According to Susan Jarratt, the Encomium of Helen has been called a work for the sake of performance (acting out) but also for instructing one on the dangerous powers of logos (Role 92). Serving as a both a tool for imitation and recitation, the Encomium of Helen also serves to instruct in the powerful ways of both muthos and logos. This also demonstrates the ways in which a logographer might go about constructing his own logos. Through Gorgias’ use of a cultural muthos, he has helped to bolster his own ethos with his audience by inculcating the gods of Athens in his logos (Role 92).

According to G. B. Keferd, Isocrates is considered a “pre-Socratic philosopher”; he was also a proponent of imitation. However, his imitation was for the training of speech, or logos. Isocrates is very clear and “does not use the noun ‘rhetoric’...preferring instead to speak of logos, ‘speech’” (Kennedy Rhetoric 39). Kennedy notes that his reluctance to use the term “rhetoric”
could be a reaction to the bad press the Sophists had received, especially by Socrates (39). It appears that many teachers and instructors of this time period were either aligning themselves with or separating themselves from the Sophists, and there was much debate over what this type of logos was, what it was, and what it did or should do.

Isocrates also taught his students composition and what we now call “invention, arrangement, and style,” and he may have been the very first to delineate these first principles of rhetoric (Isocrates 74; Kennedy Rhetoric 40). Isocrates also makes his pedagogy quite clear in *Against the Sophists*:

> ...the student must not only have the requisite aptitude but he must learn the different kinds of discourse and practise [sic] himself in their use; and the teacher, for his part, must so expound the principles of the art with the utmost possible exactness as to leave out nothing that can be taught, and, for the rest, he must in himself set such an example of oratory that the students who have taken form under his instruction and are able to pattern after him... (74)

The teacher is thus charged with the responsibility to “act as a model for their students,” so the student can begin to emulate and imitate the teacher (Morgan 307). Isocrates continues to separate himself far from the Sophists, not only in his language but also in the that which he teaches to his students: “Isocrates insists that his instruction encompasses knowledge directed toward both the management of one’s own household and the governance of the polis...” (Atwill 27). This distinction also serves to show Isocrates’ distinction from the Sophist’s only concern with success in public affairs when it came to “rhetoric,” or logos. It was imperative to Isocrates that not only his methods of involvement and minimal number of students he would take on at a time, but also the breadth to which his teaching would encompass (Dobson 82).
“Isocrates, unlike the Sophists, never lectured to large audiences...” (Dobson 82). This confirms the claims of Sophists as “performing” rhetoric, lecturing and participating in public contests (Guthrie 41-43). Although many of the Sophists utilized mimeticism as a method for learning “logos,” Isocrates’ ideology set himself apart from Sophistry of ancient Greece at that time. His teaching philosophy and pedagogy are very reminiscent of David Bartholomae: Teacher as imitatee (7-11).

Rhetoric in Action

More recent scholarship concerning the Sophists and the Pre-Socratics, primarily that of Deborah Hawhee, has provided a fresh new view into not only their rhetorical pedagogies but has also brought to light new evidence in the history of rhetorical instruction and early practices. Hawhee’s essay “Bodily Pedagogies: Rhetoric, Athletics, and the Sophists’ Three Rs” focuses on the syncretism between the training and practice of athleticism and rhetoric in what she describes as a “bodily art”: “From this spatial intermingling of practices there emerged a curious syncretism between athletics and rhetoric, a particular crossover in pedagogical and learning styles, a crossover that contributed to the development of rhetoric as bodily art, an art learned, practiced, and performed by and with the body as well as the mind” (144). This conflation of space where both rhetor and athlete would share space became a contact point between the two disciplines, thus creating a symbiotic relationship.

Hawhee’s research does not stop there, once she establishes the connection between sophistic activity in the gymnasia, where athletic training also took place, she then posits her “three Rs of sophistic pedagogy: rhythm, repetition, and response.” (145). Because both disciplines were occupying the same space for exercises and practice, there was a communication between both schools. When practicing, the athletes incorporated the use of
music and rhythm to establish a beat with which to practice. Students, being within proximity and hearing this rhythm, were affected in the “rhythmic, tonic quality of the [their] speeches (146).

Hawhee’s second R in “sophistic pedagogy” deals with the Isocratean contention of the parallelism of athletic and rhetorical training in the establishment of a “repeated, sustained engagement...as elaborated by Isocrates in Antidosis” thus creating what she refers to as a “habituation” (151). This would be much like we would discover as the result of a repetitive motion when learning a sport. Repetition then leads to a habit of action for student of rhetoric through exercise and practice. I have already mentioned that Isocrates was a proponent of mimeticism and Hawhee astutely does as well: “…the observing and admiring lead to an active emulating, an attempt to become like the objects of admiration through repetition of their actions” (153). Recall that after early Greek primary education, young boys post-primary education was in the form of a one-on-one, teacher-student relationship (Freeman 157). The pupil admirers the teacher, and puts himself in a position to emulate the teacher.

The final R, response, is the systematic reaction to the opposition: “In short, repetition in sophistic-style rhetorical training is always bound up with responsiveness within particular contexts” (159). As the boxer or wrestler must act in response to the situation, so must the rhetor when responding to his kairos. The education of the rhetor must include response training to opponents. Perhaps beginning with Protagoras’s Dissoi Logoi, students learned the art of arguing both sides of an argument thus preparing the student to respond.

The implications of this research reveal that rhetorical pedagogy and practice are current in today’s critical analysis of effective educational strategies. Hawhee’s essay not only shows
how rhetoric was mastered and taught by the Pre-Socratics and Sophists but also that their methodologies and practices remain as viable pedagogies in our classrooms: rhetoric in action.
Works Cited


