“. . . education among all kinds of men [and women] always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent. Nevertheless, men [and women] strive to know.” – W.E.B. Du Bois

I take rhetoric to be “the task of discussing capably the things which art and custom have fixed for the uses of citizenship, and of securing, as far as possible, the agreement of your hearers.” Rhetoric, then, is a principle of action and of power, a task of discussion. As a teacher I perform the task of rhetoric and I teach students to find their voice through reading, thinking, writing, and speaking.

Reading is essential to learning. Books constitute a central portion of every class I teach, both on the syllabus and during class meeting time. The interest is not in books as such, but in the ideas and arguments on the pages. Indeed, Philip Rieff has said that teachers of the humane studies are “people of the page.” The focus of my class time is devoted to speaking about the assigned readings, and to place those readings inside the context of human existence. I encourage students to read closely what is assigned as our precious time together is, alas, too short. Keeping the volume of assigned reading within the bounds of propriety allows students to keep up, encourages teachers to discuss topics relevant to the readings so as to reward diligent study, and prompts students to prepare fully for class time.

Progress for “people of the page” requires time to think. Students who are overburdened with too many meaningless, “busy-work” assignments have far too little time to reflect on what they are doing, and why. Of course, teachers cannot compel students to take time to think. However, through the asking of complex yet relevant questions teachers can inspire students to reflect on the readings and the perplexing questions that persist in hounding humankind. The big picture must not be lost in the thick of thin things.

In addition to my commitment to challenge students to read and think, I motivate them to express clearly what they have read and thought. I aim to help them find their rhetorical voice through speaking and writing assignments. I craft writing assignments to be challenging and to spring directly from the reading assignments so students can see continuity in their course work and make new connections. In every class I teach there is time reserved for students to speak, to take the floor, as it were, and to present their ideas to the multitude. Articulate precision is one of the great elements of intellect, and students need practice vocalizing their thoughts, but not through some artificial assignment. Instead, what they say should be in direct response to course materials and public controversy. As students speak, I often question them orally about what they have said.

Teaching is a persuasive enterprise. Edward Said has said that the “intellectual’s role is to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by the combatants on behalf of official memory . . .” A vision of citizen critics discussing capably the stuff of public life gives me great excitement for life and in the classroom. Reading, thinking, writing, and speaking, all things rhetorical, are the essence of my teaching philosophy.

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1 See the Rhetorica ad Herennium.