

Rhetorical Error: Combating Post-Truth and AI Nihilism Through Active Discourse Production

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Abstract

Using the classical pedagogical strategies of Isocrates as a framework, this paper investigates how a renewed focus on civic rhetoric in the classroom will allow for increased dialogue and active discourse production between those inside and outside the Academy. Although Isocrates did not use the word “rhetoric” himself, reading his translated texts through a current lens allows the application of rhetoric through renewed frameworks. As we find ourselves mainly existing in a post-truth world, there is a proclivity among many to replace facts with pathos. As Lee McIntyre (2018) explores in his work *Post Truth*, heightened reliance on emotion, social media, and fake news represents a dangerous form of nihilism. Connected to this is the abandonment of traditional media, the dismissal of evidence, and a blatant disregard for the truth—all of which can be considered “rhetorical error.” As individuals become more and more distanced from others through a reliance on the digital, they retreat into what McIntyre calls “information silos” (2018). Active discourse production, building on Isocrates’ notion of classical pedagogy, can directly challenge these information silos. Hart (2006) argues for returning to classical pedagogy in the writing classroom. This paper builds on this work, suggesting that pedagogy grounded in ideals put forth by Isocrates can directly challenge both post-truth nihilism and rhetorical error.

Keywords: rhetorical error, pedagogy, post-truth, nihilism, discourse

This paper builds on the Argumentor Conference’s 2022 call for proposals and papers, which invited scholars to consider “Error” and how they relate to the term and concept. The call reminded scholars, researchers, and educators that Error is a constant, and that we “often find ourselves misguided or confused” (Bakó, 2022). Error occurs in debate,

pedagogy, spaces of controversy, relationships, and more facets of everyday life. Connected to this idea of Error is that of “rhetorical error,” a term that can also be linked to rhetorical aberration (Gunn, 2020). The year 2016 and subsequent years have augmented the blurring of lines between rhetoric and other forms of strategic communication, notably that of manipulation and incautious propaganda. As Gunn (2020) illustrates in *Political Perversion: Rhetorical Aberration in the Time of Trumpeteering*, this manipulation is part of a recent turn towards the aberrant and obstructive, manifesting itself through recent and ongoing events that were augmented by the 2016 and now recent, 2020 US presidential election. In short, strategic communication and responsible rhetoric have increasingly fallen by the wayside in the age of misinformation and disinformation (McIntyre, 2018). In addition, rhetorical strategies that promote productive discourse and meaning-making are widely failing.

However, the university classroom can still be a space of intervention and invention, but only for a short time. As threats of AI and ChatGPT loom large, the window for encouraging and instilling the importance of critical thinking is short-lived. For example, a barrage of student-made videos can be found on YouTube where university students offer tips for using ChatGPT without getting flagged for plagiarism, cheating, and academic dishonesty. One example is “5 Ways to Use Chat GPT as a student without getting caught,” which has reached over 17,000 views (The Innovation Classroom, 2023). Additionally, a recent opinion article published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* written by Columbia University undergraduate Owen Kichizo Terry relays how widespread and prevalent the use of ChatGPT is among students (2023). Written firsthand from the undergraduate student perspective at an Ivy League institution, Kichizo Terry discusses the widespread use of the program, which many professors are still vastly unaware of (2023). The article, titled “I’m a Student. You Have No Idea How Much We’re Using ChatGPT,” highlights the use of the ChatGPT program to complete homework assignments, discussion posts, and papers (Kichizo Terry, 2023). Notably, Kichizo Terry also emphasizes the importance of reminding students of the weight of critical thinking and reflection (2023). In other words, what is the true meaning and purpose of obtaining an education? What is our role as educators in addressing the removal of critical thinking?

Although this paper intends not to discuss the ethicality or use of Chat GPT solely, it is essential to note the harmful impact of Chat GPT and other forms of AI on critical thinking, writing, and imagination (Bishop, 2023; Shidiq, 2023; Yu, 2023). As rhetoric and the importance of civic discourse span disciplines, so does the impact of a loss of critical thinking among student populations and beyond. As Shidiq (2023) indicates, Chat GPT has

the potential to produce creative works similar to the quality of human-produced work. Bishop (2023) calls on students to understand the difference between machine-based writing and sophisticated writing. Bishop, coming from the perspective of a law professor, argues how “[s]ophisticated writing [as opposed to machine-based writing] ... requires critical thinking skills that language-generation models do not possess” (2023). Yu, writing from the discipline of Educational Psychology, explicates how reliance on Chat GPT technology “...diminish[es] human thinking and judgment abilities” (2023). A common theme emerges from this brief foray into the implications of ChatGPT for varied disciplines. There is concern regarding a loss of critical thinking and reasoning. Connected to this is a genuine and tangible threat of ChatGPT’s ability to create imaginative and artistic creative works.

Beginning to use and investigate the classical pedagogical strategies of Isocrates as a framework, this paper explores how a renewed focus on civic rhetoric and liberal education in the university classroom will allow for increased dialogue between those inside and outside the Academy. Renewed frameworks will encourage discussions regarding the importance of critical thinking and meaning-making. This can address rhetorical error and what Gunn (2020) terms “rhetorical aberration”—unproductive rhetoric that is unwelcome and counterproductive to effective reflection and critical thinking. Conversations regarding AI, ChatGPT, and the regulation of AI programs can also follow. Providing students with tools to think critically about current exigencies such as political manipulation, propaganda, and implications surrounding the use of AI and Chat GPT is vital. As a goal, university learning should promote responsible rhetoric. Responsible rhetoric promotes overcoming rhetorical error—encompassing ideas such as citational justice (Ahmed et al., 2022; Kumar and Karusula, 2021; Kwon, 2022), the use of evidence to support claims, and critical thinking and reasoning, among others.

Although Isocrates did not use the word “rhetoric” himself (Carloni, 2022), reading his translated texts through a current lens allows the application of rhetoric through renewed frameworks. Furthermore, Isocrates is central to rhetoric despite his lack of definition of rhetoric and position among other rhetoricians of his time—as William Benoit states, “Isocrates is without question one of the greatest teachers in the history of rhetoric, if not the greatest (1990, p. 251). This lies in Isocrates’ ability to view rhetoric as something that encompasses vital concepts such as “imagination and creativity” (p. 26), as discussed by Erika Rummel, dating back to her 1979 article titled “Isocrates’ Ideal of Rhetoric: Criteria of Evaluation.” Isocrates did not value a simplistic approach to rhetoric, which promoted “a mechanical reproduction of pre-cast notions” (Rummel, 1979, p. 26).

Rhetoric, as “imagination and creativity” (Rummel, 1979, p. 26), should be a focus of any university course. James Crosswhite addresses rhetoric and reasoning in his work *The Rhetoric of Reason* (originally published in 1996); for example, he highlights how acts such as claiming and questioning are communicative acts connected to ethics. Crosswhite (2012) also discusses responsibility in his book, encouraging students to understand purpose and address “argumentation” with dialogue and appropriate responsible research. This acknowledgment of responsibility is still relevant, especially as the rise in misinformation and disinformation continues—one area that has augmented this is the rise of fake news following the COVID-19 pandemic (Gonzalez, 2019).

As we find ourselves existing in a post-truth world, there is a proclivity among many to replace facts, diligent research, and evidence with pathos, a theme discussed in Bruce McComiskey’s 2017 book *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*. Often, the ability to reason critically is left behind in the wake of global events. As critical reasoning falls to the wayside, so does the ability to seek sound and unbiased evidence. By the same token, as Lee McIntyre (2018) explores in his book *Post Truth*, heightened reliance on emotion, social media, and fake news represents a dangerous form of nihilism. Connected to this is the abandonment of traditional media, the dismissal of reliable evidence, and a blatant disregard for the truth—all of which can be considered “rhetorical error.” This blatant disregard and abandonment of critical thinking and, therefore, reflection is connected to Gunn’s (2020) scholarship, which is noted above.

Moreover, as individuals become more and more distanced from others through a reliance on the digital, they retreat into what McIntyre defines as “information silos” (2018). This term came about before the current boom of AI and computer-generated writing and image programs, but it is just as relevant today as it was in 2018. Information silos will be intensified by AI and programs such as ChatGPT. Retreating away from dialogic classroom exchange (to draw on Bakhtin), AI removes the human-centered goal of information exchange and communication. Building on Isocrates’ notion of classical pedagogy, active discourse production can challenge these information silos. Hart (2006) argues for a turn back to classical pedagogy in the writing classroom. For this paper, I build on current times, again suggesting that pedagogy connected to Isocrates can directly challenge both post-truth nihilism and rhetorical error. Returning to civic rhetoric can also now address and challenge issues relating to using AI and ChatGPT in the university classroom and beyond.

To further assess the idea of rhetorical error, a simple definition for the word “error” renders the following two explanations: “a mistake” and “the state or condition of being wrong in conduct or judgment.” A simple search for the term “rhetoric” renders

standard definitions related to persuasion and a reminder that rhetoric and logic are among the three ancient arts of discourse. Rhetoric can now often carry a negative connotation—rhetoric in a post-truth and post-Trump era has gained traction as a means of bombast and exaggeration (Gunn, 2020). As a scholar of rhetoric, I understand that how others view rhetoric, as well as the application of rhetoric itself, is varied.

We are constantly in a state of rhetorical flux, as Barbara Biesecker (1989) articulates in her widely cited work regarding the rhetorical situation. As LaToya L. Sawyer discusses in her analysis of Biesecker's "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from within the Thematic of 'Différance'" she states how "Biesecker pointed out that deconstruction hadn't been productively appropriated by critics working in Rhetoric" (2012). Sawyer also points to Biesecker's use of "Derrida's [theory of] deconstruction and différance to upset the hierarchy altogether," with the hierarchy being Bitzer's notion that the rhetorical situation is always dependent on the event itself (2012). Thinking of rhetoric in flux and drawing on Edbauer's (2005) theory of rhetorical ecologies is also necessary when considering rhetoric's role in critical thinking, knowledge acquisition, and meaningful discourse production.

We also must turn to Andrea Lunsford's well-known and cited definition of rhetoric—"rhetoric is the art, study, and practice of human communication" (Hallsby & Jones, 2022). It is useful to focus on communication here, as well as Lunsford's view that rhetoric is a foundation—a foundation that should be used for ethical communication and discourse. In her 2012 lecture titled "The Role of Rhetoric (and Social and Other Media) Writing in 21st Century Universities," Lunsford also illustrates the idea of "rhetrickery"—a term defining rhetoric as "as a bag of cheap tricks, the veil of truth, or mere words." Although we cannot fully move away from "rhetrickery" and irresponsible uses of rhetoric by some, it should be a goal of rhetoric scholars to address the concept of rhetorical error. If the purpose of ethical and responsible rhetoric is to encourage accountable meaning-making, reflection, and critical thinking, then these skills need to be a continued focus. This is especially paramount for pedagogy and teaching, as rhetoricians are also professors, teaching in the space of a university classroom.

This renewed focus on civic rhetoric in the classroom will allow for increased dialogue between those inside and outside the Academy. As both a teacher and practitioner of rhetoric, I aim for rhetoric to be inclusive and accessible—in my opinion, everyone can promote positive change and action through discourse and communication. The teachings of Isocrates have long been connected to rhetorical studies and pedagogy—but this interest should be renewed in the wake of our post-truth era. The edited collection *Isocrates and Civic Education* (Poulakos and Depew, 2004) is one collection of scholarship addressing

Isocrates and education. One essay of note, "Isocrates' Civic Education and the Question of *doxa*," also written by Poulakos (2004), considers *doxa* (here, in the sense of judgment). Isocrates taught elements of persuasion but was mainly interested in teaching his students how to make sound judgments within the political arena (Poulakos, 2004). Harkening back to the work of Gunn (2020), this is one area that has been lacking—at least in the American political arena. Another essay of note, "Logos and Power in Sophistical and Isocratean Rhetoric" by Ekaterina V. Haskins (2004), recalls Isocrates and his reaction and opposition to Gorgias, who depicted rhetoric as a "powerful lord." Isocrates was not supportive of selfish rhetoric (Haskins, 2004). Additionally, Haskins (2004) does not regard Isocrates as an elitist—a productive claim when considering Isocrates and his role in current pedagogy in the modern university classroom.

Isocrates has also been used as a framework to teach technical writing (Brizee, 2015; Dubinsky, 2002; Haskins, 2004; Simmons and Grabill, 2007; Scott, 2009). Allen Brizee, in their article "Using Isocrates to Teach Technical Communication and Engagement," explains how "...integrating Isocrates into the pedagogical framework of civic engagement can help technical communication students better understand their rhetorical situations and the approaches necessary for collaborative knowledge building" (2015, p.135). This notion of collaboration is critical here, as technical communicators often work both in and out of the Academy. Moreover, Simmons and Grabill argue that without rhetorical theory, "it is difficult to foster collaborative knowledge building between civic and academic stakeholders" (2007, cited in Brizee, 2015, p. 135). Collaborative knowledge building between stakeholders can also apply to more significant issues addressed in this paper, such as ethicalities surrounding the regulation of AI and Chat GPT. Furthermore, in "Service Learning as a Path to Virtue: The Ideal Orator in Communication," Dubinsky (2002) explores connections to service learning and classical rhetoric—yet another way to foster collaboration and dialogic exchange with those outside the university setting.

Similarly, collaborative knowledge building can help us address "rhetorical error" and the by-products of rhetorical error. Again, drawing on McIntyre (2018), he clarifies how a heightened reliance on emotion, social media, and fake news represents a dangerous form of nihilism. For example, McIntyre (2018) discusses how confusion over verifiable facts (like who won the popular vote in the 2016 election) does not happen by accident. There is always a group that will stand to profit, or it may be for the power that comes from being able to now lie without consequences. As with propaganda, the goal is not to expose the truth but rather to demonstrate power over the truth itself. In short, reality is being constructed and created. Similarly, a false creation of truth relates to AI's creation

of knowledge and creative works. Removing the very human notion of creativity, imagination, or critical thinking is highly dangerous. And to reiterate, even before the onslaught of AI, there was a propensity to dismiss critical thinking and reflection.

As I have indicated, individuals continue to become more and more distanced from others through a reliance on the digital, retreating into information silos (McIntyre, 2018). Information silos threaten education, personal relationships, and overall society on many levels. These silos remove any possibility of productive discourse or meaning-making. As professors, how would we be able to instruct those already encapsulated in a silo of their own beliefs—beliefs which might now be viewed as “facts.” As a professor teaching at a small college in the American South, I can attest that these information silos are typical and can make teaching and dialogic exchange a challenge. Active discourse production, building on Isocrates’ notion of classical pedagogy, can directly and actively challenge these information silos.

Currently, I am designing a syllabus for a new class I plan to teach, tentatively titled “Civic Rhetoric and Communication: Challenging Disinformation, Misinformation, and a Post-Truth Society through Active Discourse and Meaning Making.” Using the framework of scholars of classical rhetoric and technical communication, with a focus on *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn* (2019), my goal is to design a course, syllabus, and curriculum which will directly challenge post-truth and AI nihilism, the imminent danger of information silos, and the social inequities perpetuated and augmented by these constructs.

As this paper concludes, I now turn to the audience while also considering varied social and cultural contexts. I encourage thinking about the following questions through a lens productive to your own classroom and pedagogical methods: How might we promote reflection in a post-truth global society? How might we use elements from Isocrates and classical pedagogy in new ways in writing and other courses? How can we address the very real issues of Chat GPT and AI, further removing the possibility of imagination and critical thinking? Now, with these very real concerns about AI’s impact on writing and education, there are equally critically critical concerns over white supremacy and misogyny in the metaverse and virtual reality. For lack of a sufficiently scholarly way to say this, the future is scarier than ever. We might not be able to catch up to ourselves. As global researchers, scholars, and teachers, how might we promote the space and time for reflection and critical thinking? I encourage us to continue conversations through cross-cultural exchange and dialogue.

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