

Written evidence

Members of the Oracy APPG will consider written, verbal and audio-visual evidence and oversee oral evidence sessions. All evidence will inform the final report.

The extended deadline for submitting written evidence is 20th September 2019. We would appreciate if the submissions would follow the following guidelines:

- Be in a Word format
- No longer than 3000 words
- State clearly who the submission is from, and whether it is sent in a personal capacity or on behalf of an organisation
- Begin with a short summary in bullet point form
- Have numbered paragraphs
- Where appropriate, provide references

Please write your evidence below and email the completed form via email to inquiry@oracyappg.org.uk with the subject line of 'Oracy APPG inquiry'

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Written evidence:

Submitted in a personal capacity as an academic expert

Oracy, rhetoric and critical skills

Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson

- Contemporary oracy education has much to gain by looking at the past, the Ancient past. This is informed by more than a decade of teaching Classical rhetoric to school pupils who found it a transformative learning experience.
- I am a Classicist. I have taught Classical Civilisation, Ancient History, Greek and Latin in Scottish and English primary and secondary schools. I am now an academic researching the value of a Classical education for contemporary learners.
- To be educated in the ancient world meant receiving formal training in speech, gesture, comportment, argumentation and listening skills. Oracy has been the heart of Classical rhetorical training. The ability to speak well was a central component of good education for centuries.
- Currently, only those studying Latin, Greek and Classical Civilisation study Classical rhetoric but it is cheap and easy to extend to all learners through collaboration with subject associations (for example: via subject knowledge enhancement and training with partners such as the National Association of Teachers of English, Team English, the Association for Citizenship Teaching, the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education and multiple oracy-focussed organisations).
- In this submission, I summarise the role of rhetoric for the Greeks and Romans and suggest ways in which it enriches oracy across the contemporary school curriculum and brings benefits for learners beyond school.

1. How did rhetoric come about?

In the early Greek world, military prowess was the indicator of success. There was no need for persuasive communication because power ensured compliance. It was in 476BC when Greek tyranny was overthrown, that law-courts were suddenly flooded with people trying to recover property through self-representation. For the first time, there was the need for individual citizens to speak up. A certain Corax (about whom we know very little) devised a method for effective argument and it went like this:

- Description of the point at issue
- Explanation of its context and importance
- Statement of arguments,
- Refutation of opposing arguments, and
- Summary

This is the first known example of a rhetorical method. People started to follow his example and were amazed by their ability to secure their desired end. As Greek democracy developed, it became increasingly important for citizens to be able to represent themselves articulately in order to contribute to public discussions about justice, welfare, war, the economy, politics and numerous other civic issues.

As the importance of talk grew, specialist 'rhetoric schools' emerged in the Greek world and, later, rhetoric continued to play an important role in Roman education. Famous names like Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Cicero and Quintilian all discussed the importance of rhetorical training for young men (and it was only men) aged 16-20 as part of their preparation for life as an adult in society.

The trouble is that they couldn't agree on what rhetoric actually is. For:

Plato: [Rhetoric] is the "art of enchanting the soul."

Aristotle: "It is a counterpart of both logic and politics - and is the faculty of utilising, in any given case, the available **means of persuasion.**"

Cicero: Rhetoric is "speech designed to persuade."

Quintilian: "Rhetoric is the art of speaking well" or "...the good man speaking well."

For today's teachers of Citizenship, Politics, Philosophy, Classics and English, there are interesting discussions to be had about the intersection of rhetoric and truth; using language to get what you want but with questionable moral motivations. These discussions are important and are likely to generate a number of opposing viewpoints. What matters, though, is that the rhetorical method provides a tried-and-tested approach to the construction and deconstruction of argument which is no less relevant and useful today than it was 2000 years ago.

2. How can rhetoric enhance learning across the curriculum?

The Citizenship curriculum in England requires that students can 'research and interrogate evidence, debate and evaluate viewpoints, make persuasive and reasoned arguments, justify and substantiate their conclusions and take informed action' (Department for Education, 2013). Applying the rhetorical method involves not just following the formula, it requires critical thinking to select the most valuable pieces of information to support your argument (Holmes-Henderson, 2013). The method's structured approach provides a framework through which students can 'think deeply and critically about a wide range of political, social, economic and ethical issues' (Department for Education 2013). Once the most compelling pieces of evidence are selected, the critical thinking continues to the arrangement stage – how can I arrange these pieces of information for maximum impact?

Rhetoric also cultivates critical literacy skills – the ability to read between the lines of others' communication (Holmes-Henderson, 2014 and 2016). The Greeks and Romans developed a handbook of more than a hundred rhetorical techniques which added colour and style to their speeches. I can certainly attest, from professional practice of teaching these rhetorical techniques in both Latin and English, that students have 'lightbulb moments' when they realise that politicians, advertisers and broadcasters still use these techniques today. Miss, does that mean that the latest Sony advert is actually a chiasmus? Yes. Oh, and the advert for Transport for London is synecdoche? Yes, yes it is. Why do so many brands use ancient rhetorical techniques today? Because they have persuaded people for 2500 years – they work. We ought to be teaching them to our young people to equip them to see through rhetorical flourish to discern truth (Holmes-Henderson,

2018a). This, for me, is the essence of critical literacy and it is transferable to every subject on the curriculum (Holmes-Henderson, 2018b).

3. Rhetoric as preparation for 'owning the room'

Rhetoric is about speech. According to the Ancients, the giving of speeches was about so much more than the words. There were rules governing body language and hand gestures (Holmes-Henderson, 2013). At rhetoric school, boys learned about the modes of persuasion – ethos, pathos and logos, where the comportment and reputation of the speaker, together with his ability to gauge and respond to the feelings of his audience were considered just as vital as the content of his speech. Ethos and pathos have important implications for oracy across the curriculum today – Burgoon's 1985 study reckoned that 65% of communication was non-verbal. Our learners need to know this, and be taught how to optimise all aspects of talking and listening – the Greeks and Romans thought about this a great deal and offer us a treasure-trove of ideas, together with a step-by-step manual.

4. How can rhetoric support oracy skills beyond the curriculum?

Rhetoric can help cultivate critical listening – equipping learners to deconstruct the speech of others and 'read between the lines'. This is so important outside school where young and old alike are bombarded with communication of all types and need some way of judging what they hear. I am suggesting that rhetoric offers a structure which, if applied, presents a path through the competing narratives.

But it is in the construction of communication that I think rhetoric can most usefully boost oracy skills. For the ancients, proficiency in rhetoric was inextricably linked to active and participatory conceptions of citizenship. To become 'responsible citizens' (a capacity which is prominent in Scotland's 'Curriculum for Excellence' [Holmes-Henderson 2013 and 2016]) young people need to be able to express themselves and their opinions in an articulate and persuasive way. Is rhetoric the only way? No, but I propose that rhetoric offers a valuable critical lens¹. If we are to move beyond weak notions of citizenship like volunteering, being environmentally friendly, picking up litter – to stronger notions including questioning the status quo, disrupting ineffective civic structures and imagining alternatives which promote social justice – learners need to become Quintilian's 'good people speaking well', particularly if we expect political literacy and, by extension, democratic deliberation to flourish in our society. This fulfils another of the GCSE Citizenship curriculum aims 'to experience and evaluate different ways that citizens can act together to solve problems and contribute to society'.

In sum, we can learn a great deal by looking at the history of communication. Rhetoric is one method through which we can teach oracy and the associated benefits include critical thinking, critical literacy and responsible citizenship.

¹ I conducted international comparative research into critical literacy education in Australia and New Zealand as a Churchill Fellow in 2013-2014 and my report is quoted extensively in the 2018 National Literacy Trust/Literacy APPG Parliamentary Commission report on Critical Media Literacy and Fake News <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/fake-news-and-critical-literacy-final-report/>

5. Increasing interest in my international collaborative rhetoric/oracy research

Upon my return from my Churchill Fellowship (see footnote 1), I organised an event at Mercers' Hall in London in September 2015 called 'Oracy across the curriculum'. This event sold out quickly and attracted 110 educators, charity workers, policy makers and professional communicators. I invited a range of keynote speakers to share a diversity of perspectives: a former hostage-negotiator, a speechwriter and numerous key stakeholders in the 'oracy movement'.

Since then, I have continued to work closely with the ESU, Voice 21 and The Association for Citizenship Teaching, and with academic colleagues in the Rhetoric Society of Europe, the Network for Oratory and Politics and Oracy at Cambridge. I have been invited to share my research into Classical rhetoric as essential equipment for living in 21st century education with a number of audiences including 350 teachers at the Team English National Conference in Peterborough in June 2019, as well as various schools and initial teacher education venues around the UK over the last 5 years (details here: <http://www.drarlenehh.com/conferences/>).

I would be delighted to provide oral evidence, upon request.

References

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