

Voice, Listening, and Telling Stories: The Communicative Construction of Rhetorical Citizenship in Small Groups

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Introduction

We proceed from the assumption that rhetorical citizenship is constructed communicatively in its microcosmic form in small groups, in conversations about forms of social behavior, interpersonal and public, about prices or elections, or about general ethical issues, among other topics. Using a new theoretical lens comprised of the three linked aspects of voice, narrative, and listening, in synergy with theories of discursive democratic activity and rhetorical citizenship, and principles of Aristotelian rhetoric, we will examine opportunities for free and equal expression of voice in small group conversations, considering processes and characteristics of those initiating and exercising voice, and the quality of the listening. Much research into listening assumes something to be listened to – speaking, or “voice,” a term that has recently been regenerated by Couldry to aid us in thinking about democracy and political/social change, and in recognizing that humans have a strong need for the process of voice, to narrate an account of oneself and to have that voice heard and taken into account. For this reason, narrative theory/methodology (Boje 1991, 2001, 2008, 2011) can be a very useful theoretical strand, and will be drawn on to analyze and represent the content of discussion and performances of rhetorical citizenship in a small group.

In addition to voice, we include the linked concept of narrative in our examination of rhetorical citizenship, and we look to some important narrative theorists of the past three decades in order to show the centrality of narrative/storytelling to human communication in general, and rhetorical citizenship in particular.

For the third and final component of our new theoretical lens we draw on listening research, because even if both voice and narrative are produced,

in any context, they are pointless unless someone is listening. We use this new lens to analyze rhetorical citizenship in a particular instance – that is, small group discussions about issues in society. We conducted an empirical study, and although our overall framework supporting this new lens has enabled us to analyze rhetorical citizenship in a tripartite way – looking at voice, narrative and listening – for the purposes of this chapter we look mainly at the narrative component. Because our theoretical framework is quite new, we will demonstrate why we think this particular framework is useful, and then will give an example of how we have used one strand of it to analyze the performance of rhetorical citizenship in a small group. We chose the small group as our context because, following Poole and Hollingshead (2004), we see the group as the basic unit of communication, believing the analysis of small groups facilitates “the detailed study of human communication exchange” (Poole and Hollingshead 2004, p. 359), allowing a focus on each individual in the group. It is also a practical choice when researching rhetorical citizenship, as it is within their small and informal friendship and family groups that citizens first construct their citizenship, perhaps to a certain extent testing out their rhetorical production before performing it anew in larger groups, for example, at a community meeting. So it is often in the small group context that citizens first deliberate about issues before doing so in a wider public sphere.

Theoretical framework

Whether the context is public or private, it could be said that citizenship is constructed communicatively every time we participate in conversations about forms of social behavior, about prices or elections, or about general ethical issues, among other topics. In such forms of discursive democratic activity – which is, by default, citizenship – the role of rhetoric has been explicitly acknowledged by many theorists for some time (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 1996, Young 2000, Ivie 2002, Dryzek 2010). Most recently, these theories have been brought into synergy and considerably refined by Kock and Villadsen (2012), who focus on, among other things, the many informal ways in which citizens discuss issues of common concern in society, arguing that such civic engagement is rhetorical, that the whole process is always already rhetorical: we each use rhetoric to construct ourselves and represent the ideas and ideals we believe in, whether the process is conscious or not. While deliberative democracy has been theorized extensively and

in many different ways, we align our conception with Cohen's view of it as public discussion or argument among equal citizens, about issues affecting them, as part of wider discussions taking place ideally across the whole of a society (Cohen, 1989). While it is widely acknowledged that the "most sophisticated account of deliberative procedures is from Habermas" (Passerlin d'Entrèves 2002, p. 7), Habermas himself seems to want to distance his theories from rhetoric when he asserts that the "tradition of rhetoric ... is interested more in speech that convinces than in its truth content" (Habermas 1984, p. 27). And yet, Habermas is a rhetorician by default, given that he sees the study of society as the study of communication, which fits within the Aristotelian framework in which citizens need rhetoric to discuss and reflect on "those aspects of human affairs for which there are no experts and for which everyone is assumed to have an opinion" (Garver 1994, p. 21). Rhetoric is quite simply the means by which "a person advocates, or provides voice for, an idea" (Herrick 1997, p. 18), engages in public discourse and thus "communicative action" (Habermas in Foss et al. 1991, p. 252).

The process of communicating one's (or one's group's) views or position will, therefore, inevitably involve rhetoric. As Young states: "rhetoric constitutes the flesh and blood of any political communication, whether in a neighborhood meeting or on the floor of Parliament" (2000, p. 65). Such communication does not even have to be formally political, as it can take place in social or socio-political contexts, but it is inevitably enacted by citizens. Before discussing the theories and models we have drawn from, we need to make clear the specific way we use the concept of rhetorical citizenship in our project. Rhetorical citizenship describes the process of rhetorically constructing and articulating one's position regarding an issue or belief of concern in the particular social context. But we argue it is more than this: rhetorical citizenship occurs ideally in a continuous feedback loop of articulating one's position, listening to, taking into account, and responding appropriately to, the positions of others, resulting in a form of mutual sense-making.

When all components of the loop operate at optimum levels, we see mutual weighing up of citizens' differing views – that is, deliberation. As Kock and Villadsen point out, when applied to public issues, deliberation "implies holding together all reasons and considerations relevant to the issue – not only those of one's own that speak for a given policy but also others that may speak against it, and that one has not yet considered" (Kock and

Villadsen 2012, p. 4). We can see from this idealistic definition of deliberation just how mutual this sense-making process needs to be. Conversely, when one or more of the components is missing or inadequate, miscommunication occurs, the quality of rhetorical citizenship diminishes, and the level of debate and the quality of the communicative action of citizens in society can suffer.

Although it is tempting to dismiss the account of deliberation above as an almost impossible ideal, we argue that at least it gives us a sketch of what “best practice” rhetorical citizenship might look like, and how it relates to the automatic human activity of exercising voice. Indeed the concept of voice, recently taken up and theorized anew by Couldry, largely includes “exchange of narratives with others” (Couldry 2010, p. 8). A true exchange requires that one “takes into account” the views of others, which can surely only occur if one maintains a relatively open mind on an issue, thus constituting an equally idealistic description – albeit from another angle – of rhetorical citizenship. As with many significant concepts, however, the devil is in the detail, and details are often in short supply in ambitious theories. In an attempt to begin conceptualizing these details, we draw on literature from the fields of communication, listening, democracy theory, and narrative analysis to first develop a critical framework for identifying the conditions that enhance or, conversely, impede the thriving of rhetorical citizenship.

Listening

If, then, an important part of *ideal* rhetorical citizenship is taking into account the narratives that citizens tell each other, what does this mean exactly? “To take into account” is “to take into consideration” in other words “to consider” that is, to “give mental attention to; think over”. We turn to the International Listening Association’s definition of listening: “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.” Competent listening incorporates affective, cognitive and behavioral (verbal, nonverbal, interactive) dimensions. How can we determine whether a person is listening effectively or not? Or, to use Coakley, Halone and Wolvin’s (1996) terms, how do we evaluate competent or incompetent listening?

In order to answer this question we turn to the organizational communication scholar, Thomas Jacobson, who studies participatory communication within the context of organizations that provide humanitarian aid

to developing countries. Jacobson has found that organizations that do not listen to (in other words “take into account”) local community needs risk developing projects that lack community engagement and ownership. Jacobson contends that participatory communication and listening are interchangeable terms, and has developed a participatory communication model, derived from Habermas’s theory of communicative action, to assess whether an organization listens and gives voice to participants during specific communication events.

As with organizations, small group dynamics can include overbearing participants who dominate conversation and control inter-group communication, behaviors that reduce or completely obstruct listening. We therefore adapt Jacobson’s (2007) participatory communication model to examine whether participants in small groups listen and give voice to each other as part of the process of rhetorical citizenship.

Narrative

But our examination of the quality of listening is not the focus of this presentation. It is, rather, narrative. We argue for the centrality of narrative in rhetoric/rhetorical citizenship, and base our argument on the work of many communication theorists over the past few decades who have researched narrative and argued for its centrality to human communication. Our species has even been renamed *homo narrans* by Walter Fisher (1987), one of the first theorists to see human communication as narration. Indeed Fisher believes that all forms of communication can be seen as stories; that is, they are “symbolic interpretations of aspects of the world, occurring in time, and shaped by history, culture and character” (Fisher 1987, p. xi). The relevance of this to rhetoric, we claim, is that these stories are – as theorised by Fisher – offered as “value-laden warrants for believing or acting in certain way” (1987, p. xi). In other words, the stories provide the means for persuasion, and readers probably do not need to be reminded that the universal description of Aristotelian Rhetoric is “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” The centrality of storytelling has also been argued for from an anthropological perspective: “Before human beings learned how to read and write, storytelling was the medium of collective memory” (Allan 2002, p. 2).

We can still see this today, for example, in the collective memory of Indigenous Australians. In Australia there have been a number of situations

in which certain groups of Indigenous people, in arguing their case in legal processes for land rights claims, have acted and sung stories of their right to own areas of ancestral land. This is a very compelling example of storytelling as a main mode of rhetorical citizenship in a specific context. It is also an example of stories functioning as “windows into the emotional, political and symbolic lives” of people, as argued by Yiannis Gabriel (2000). As further support for this perspective, we can argue – following Bruner – that narrative is the form intrinsic to human thinking, that our brains are hardwired to organize experience as narratives, with the most important of these narratives being each person’s autobiographical one.

The process of telling our stories, often using them as warrants for our beliefs or for our actions as citizens, aims to gain support, and thus to engage in a sort of collective sense-making. This was first demonstrated in an organizational context in Boje’s seminal 1991 article in which he conducted an ethnographic study of a large firm, and showed “how people perform stories to make sense of events, introduce change, and gain political advantage during their conversations ... [He found] the stories were dynamic, varied by context, and were sometimes terse, requiring the hearer to fill in silently major chunks of story line, context, and implication” (Boje 1991, p. 106). This study brought into organisational theory the view of organisations as “collective storytelling systems ... in which the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sense making.” So in organisations and in citizen interaction more generally, sense making is a collective process enacted rhetorically, frequently via storytelling (Boje 1991).

Voice

So what happens if/when storytelling is insufficiently taken into account in society? It seems intuitive to suggest that there would be a deficit of shared sense-making among citizens. Some theorists go further than this, arguing that “society cannot work ... unless there is a good degree of shared meaning, and society’s ills are due to a lack of shared meaning” (Bohm, 1996, cited in Allan 2002, p. 230). In other words, the state of our democracies is suffering. This view of the declining quality of democracy has been articulated by many theorists, in particular by media theorists, of which Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) are notable examples. According to them, citizens’ shared orientation to the public sphere where matters of common concern are addressed has been waning since the middle of the twentieth century.

Significantly, in seeking a way forward from this, in a world divided by fundamental differences in values, Couldry subsequently argued for a turn towards Aristotle's ethics. This approach asks: "What do we need to do to live together well?" Couldry does not give us too many specifics, but he does say that we should aim for Aristotle's *phronēsis* – that is, practical wisdom. This would occur, Couldry believes, through the circulation of all necessary information and facts in society, and through opportunities for the expression of opinion and voice by as many citizens as possible. We don't all have to agree on everything, but we can agree on certain underlying conditions – respectful listening to each other's rhetorical constructions of their citizenship, shared sense-making, openness and reflexivity.

A development of this view is achieved in Couldry's 2010 book, *Why Voice Matters*, in which he terms the "recognition of people's capacities for social cooperation" as "voice" (Couldry 2010, p. 2) or, in other words, people's rhetorical citizenship, although he doesn't actually use this term. Couldry further defines "voice" as process, as "giving an account of oneself and what affects one's life ... an irreducible part of what it means to be human" (2010, p. vi). However, the opportunity to have one's voice heard is seriously diminished "across various domains: economic, political, cultural [because] we are now governed in ways that deny the value of voice and insist instead on the primacy of market functioning" (2010, p. xi). According to this view, voice ideally "involves us in an ongoing process of reflection, *exchanging narratives back and forth*" (2010, p. 8, emphasis added). And this sort of narrative exchange, this exercising of one's "voice" needs support – an atmosphere of cooperation, an optimum level of listening, and ongoing processes of reflection. Proceeding from Couldry's argument, our hypothesis is that a crucial part of how people construct themselves rhetorically and articulate their positions on issues (which is of course rhetorical citizenship), and this is done by way of narratives, an important element of voice. So the specific question that we want to address in this chapter is: What part do narrative and voice play in rhetorical citizenship and especially in small group deliberation? We will now proceed to the empirical case study we conducted in order to explore this question.

Methodology

We follow David Snowden's methodology (2000) which involves systematic collection of anecdotes using anthropological observation, capturing stories

by recording them. The recorded stories are then transcribed, read, and systematically analyzed. We conducted a very brief analysis of this sort, and in our analysis we were guided by Boje's distinction between narrative and what he calls "ante-narrative." Boje argues for the use of "ante-narrative" analysis, because if we look only for neat, complete narratives, we will be disappointed. Boje argues that the stories we tell are more a sort of random flow of fragments, often not quite yet shaped into a coherent story. He says: "narrative is post, a retrospective explanation of storytelling" (Boje 2001, p. 3). We could equally call these fragmentary flows pre- or proto-narratives, but since Boje has theorized and trialed ante-narrative analysis, we are following that method, amalgamating it with Poole's analysis of small group talk, and with Snowden's ethnographic analysis – getting people to talk, recording it, and analyzing it.

Our small group was made up of three volunteers – two men and one woman, all in their twenties, who had just completed their masters' degrees at a large Australian university; two were born in Australia, the other was an exchange student from Italy (the pseudonyms of these three participants are Roy, Dino, and Gina). Each participant was asked to choose a current issue in society with which to start a brief conversation. We determined the order in which participants would choose topics by taking their names, unseen, out of a hat. The first conversation, chosen by Roy, was on the topic of university courses being put online by 39 of the largest universities in the world, including their own university. The other two topics were national identity, and refugees.

We started with the topic, university courses going online. This was Roy's first comment, in which he demonstrated that he wanted to make sure that the others understood the prevalent terminology:

R: I would like to talk about university courses going online ... Does everyone know what MOOCs are? (R:1)

He went on to present his view, which we have decided in our analysis to categorize as *gently* pro online courses. The other two participants asked for some clarification. One participant, Dino, positioned himself, equally gently and respectfully, as not really in favor of the idea (D: 1).

The third participant, Gina, positioned herself as explicitly "neutral":

I'm undecided on the fees versus free; like, I know it's open access and worldwide and global but, like, I'm pretty neutral, I don't really know where I stand because I see both sides. (G: 2)

Gina and Dino then asked short questions of Roy (the initiator of this topic), in order to get more information; once they felt confident about the topic, probably also about how their ideas, their “voices,” would be received, each of the two who did not propose the topic gave a type of narrative. This is an example of what Couldry talks about when he says for voice to occur, there must be social support, for example, polite and empathic listeners and a feeling of comfort (Couldry, 2010, p. 9).

This is Dino's narrative:

D: Before we were saying how people might be at work and need to have a degree... I could tell you a thing from personal experience: my mother at 50 years, decided to complete her degree in foreign languages while teaching, she's a primary school teacher, and while working she went to university and got her degree. It was ... as a person who works, I think it's even better to have someone, a teacher, who guides you because you don't have any experience, you're not used to studying, and you always need someone who guides you ... (D: 4)

We can see here how the way he expresses his voice in non-support of online courses is very much embedded in his personal narrative. He uses this story about his mother to make his argument, the crux of which is that all learning should occur with a guide. This argument is the last sentence of his story. We see here that by way of his story he is actually presenting “value-laden warrants for believing or acting in certain ways” (Fisher 1987, p. xi). Dino rhetorically constructs his position *but* he tailors it to the social context he is in by taking into account that his position is more “contra” the issue than those of the other two participants, and what we see here is an example of his responding in a manner that he considers appropriate – not too didactic, not saying, “online courses are bad; everyone needs an actual teacher” – but in giving the story of his mother, he's saying his position on the issue is contingent on this narrative.

What happens next is very interesting: Gina starts her narrative by creating a link from Dino's story to her own story, which gives validity to Dino's story, showing that she sees it as relevant, showing that she is “taking

into account” his voice and his story, a crucial aspect of hearing the voice of others.

G: ... well I'm not as old as your mum but ... but one of the reasons I chose [this University]... is because it's all on campus and you have to attend classes and everything; ... and I tried to juggle part time masters study with full time work and it didn't work, and for that reason I've decided ... to quit full time work so I have the ability to come to uni and interact ... because otherwise I could get my piece of paper on line but it would just be a piece of paper and nothing else. (G: 4)

What is notable here is that she has moved away from her original stated neutrality, to align more with the position Dino has articulated, and she voices her own personal story to reinforce her new position. Clearly Dino's story resonated with her – and as a result she instigated mutual sense-making (Weick 1995) as she responded by telling her own story, which followed the same line of argument as Dino's.

We argue that both these stories show themselves as part of a continuous feedback loop of articulating one's position, listening to, taking into account, and responding appropriately to the voices of others in which each articulates his or her own position; by way of these voiced narratives, participants enacted a mutual weighing up of differing views, a collective process of sense-making (Weick 1995), evincing a very egalitarian/democratic form of citizenship.

The next topic the three participants discussed was refugees. Dino proposed the topic and Gina was the first to respond:

G: well **I got really irked...** [when someone used the term] “illegal asylum seekers”, and I was ... “Well **that's just a really stupid take**”... but... **I don't actually know too much about the situation**, ... I've just started working at Amnesty International. ...we're a big country, we've got lots of land, why can't we share? **That's just my take**. None of **this political rubbish** ... no one comes here ... because they think, “Oh I'm going come to Australia and see how it is...”; they... can't leave [legally], **often it's a life and death situation**, ... it's their one chance of survival, and **that's my take on it**. (G: 6, emphases added)

There are narrative elements here (for example, she narrates where she works) but the narrative is very fragmentary, very much an example of what

Boje calls “ante-narrative,” by which he means no “proper plot sequence and mediated coherence ... [but instead] unconstructed and fragmented” (Boje 2001, p. 3).

Gina’s characters in her story are vague – for example, whoever used the term “illegal asylum seekers” is not given, is in fact absent, one of the gaps Boje mentions in ante-narrative, but Gina is still expressing her voice, embedding her perceptions in her own lived experiences – for example, her work for Amnesty International. We note also the rhetorical devices she uses to make her argument: she represents her own emotions quite strongly, using rhetorical pathos, linguistic features that we have represented by bolding the text above. At the same time she retreats a bit from this strong stance by saying “that’s just my take on it,” which we argue is to use rhetorical ethos to construct herself as someone who can at least see that others might think differently from her on this issue. In offering her own voice in this way she ensures she is not dismissing the voices of the others, is still “listening” to their voices; in other words, she wants to maintain an open mind, and see this discussion as very much an “exchange” of voices, not one person simply lecturing the others in a didactic manner without taking their views into account.

As the conversation proceeds, Gina becomes noticeably more comfortable in the position she’s constructed for herself; from the implied acceptance of her position by the other two participants (they don’t disagree with her, they take her voice into account); she clearly feels there’s a certain mutuality to the sense-making, and she drops her “hedging” phrases (“that’s just my take”), and expresses her voice much more strongly in favor of welcoming others into Australia and the need for assimilation:

G: ... **my dad was one of the first Indians to come**, and at that time **all the Indians were the outcasts** and now they’ve assimilated, then maybe the Vietnamese ... If we actually look back, then it was like the Sudanese, Africans, and they are now assimilating and now it’s all the people who are coming as asylum seekers coming from [Afghanistan]... and **we need to make more of an effort to assimilate them or to educate them** ... (G: 7, emphases added)

As we can see, here she is using the story of her father’s migrant experience, which is also a way of constructing her own ethos – she’s the daughter of someone who was initially an “outcast,” but who over time became assimilated.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have presented our specific usage of the term rhetorical citizenship to include the concept that rhetorical citizenship occurs ideally in a continuous feedback loop of articulating one's position, listening to, and responding appropriately to the positions of others. We described the new theoretical lens that we have constructed for our analysis of rhetorical citizenship, comprised of voice, listening and narrative.

Our empirical study of a small group discussion shows that narrative (and/or ante-narrative) is employed by participants at various stages in the feedback loop – and, in fact, has led us to include another stage in the feedback loop. Our findings indicate that participants use narrative as a method to self-reflect verbally on a topic, in the early stages of a group discussion, to help one find one's position and to explore the “social environment” of public spheres; in our study narrative was also used by more than one participant to articulate feelings and to demonstrate taking account of others' views – illustrating one's understanding of, or extension of, another's viewpoint by using a story. Narrative was also used by participants as a means of responding to others, the final stage of our feedback loop. At times, we saw evidence of the use of very strong and explicit rhetoric in a narrative responding to another's position, using emotive or persuasive terms to advocate or to reassert one's own position in response to another's.

To conclude, we ask: what are the implications of our findings for the process of rhetorical citizenship? To answer this, we return to Habermas and his concept of the public sphere as a place for (the always rhetorical) exchange of views and argumentation by citizens. In this study, we have extended Habermas's conception of the public sphere from 19th century European salon society to the small group context (equally, it could be extended to contexts of public debate or community deliberation). For rhetorical citizenship to occur in its ideal form, the public sphere, in whatever context, will provide an environment where participants are able not only to use voice and narrative to formulate and then articulate their position, but also to facilitate listening to, taking into account the views of others, and to respond appropriately to, the positions of others. We believe our analysis of the micro public sphere has implications for the policy and practice of democratic participation in macro public spheres – for example, between organizations and local citizens during deliberation about the planning of projects that impact a community. Acknowledging

that more sustainable societies cannot be achieved without the participation of local communities, stakeholders and interest groups in more open, deliberative processes, the UN Conference on Environment and Development formalized Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, stating the need for participation of all concerned citizens and the imperative of providing them with access to information, judicial and administrative proceedings (UNCED, 1992, Principle 10). In 1998, the adoption of the Aarhus Convention, Article 8, as part of the UN European Economic Commission, established citizens' rights to information and to fair participation in the development of environmental regulations (United Nations Treaty Collection, 1998).

Citizen participation has been embedded in France's national legal framework since the mid-1980s, following major conflicts concerning transport infrastructure projects. New legal procedures were enacted during the 1990s to enhance public and stakeholder participation, including the Law of Public Debate (CNDP, 1996), and creation of the National Commission of Public Debate (CNDP). The CNDP, as an independent administrative authority, was created to administer organization–citizen debates, to guarantee impartiality, to ensure the quality of debates, and to watch over the respective organization's methods of engagement.

The emerging theme from these and other international policies is the need for democratic empowerment of citizens in decision-making. Findings from this study can assist governments and organizations to ensure their policies for democratic public participation provide a public sphere for rhetorical citizenship that operates in a continuous feedback loop of articulating one's position, listening to the positions of others, and finally responding appropriately to them.

Given that stories are the main way humans share meanings, more research built upon our framework could assist in mitigating the noted present lack of voice in society, by suggesting conditions that would enhance the expression of voice and the construction of shared meanings among citizens.

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