

## Rhetoric, Citizenship, and Cultural Literacy

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**Abstract:** In their article "Rhetoric, Citizenship, and Cultural Literacy" Kris Rutten and Ronald Soetaert start from concerns in contemporary educational debates about a growing lack of civic literacy. These complaints are raised both in the public sphere, in institutions of pedagogy, and in scholarship about the form, content, and function of civic literacy and civic education. Although there is an ongoing debate about the alleged decrease of political interest and the current state of civic literacy, it is clear that civic education has become an important focus of different governmental initiatives. Rutten and Soetaert aim to move away from a straightforward definition of citizenship in general and civic literacy in particular by developing a rhetorical framework for a broader and contextualized understanding of civic and cultural literacies by exploring what this implies for a contemporary humanist and liberal education.

## **Kris RUTTEN and Ronald SOETAERT**

### **Rhetoric, Citizenship, and Cultural Literacy**

Many disciplines — from history to science, from literature to mathematics — have revisited the importance of cultural literacy to describe the fact that students lack basic knowledge teachers (and society as a whole) assume they would have mastered as part of their general education. The argumentative structure can be read as a kind of trope: if the audience agrees that there is a crisis in literacy then answers need to be formulated to solve the problem. In the answers to the alleged crisis in cultural literacy the boundaries between progressive and conservative points of view are blurred. E.D. Hirsch highlighted the importance of cultural literacy — as "the oxygen of social intercourse" — to describe the level and breadth of knowledge that citizens need to participate in democracy (19). Over the past two decades there has been a growing interest in debates about the relation between education, democracy, and citizenship. The focus has been on the promotion of democracy and the formation of democratic institutions, as well as on the importance of citizenship often starting from concerns — both by educators and politicians — about decreasing levels of civic participation and political engagement (see Biesta and Lawy; Lawy and Biesta). These developments can be related to processes whereby during the second half of the twentieth century national identities have been questioned, both in the public sphere and in scholarship. At the same time, however, there has been a rebirth of nationalism as an influential identity marker in reaction to trends such as globalization and multiculturalism. Being a "good" citizen is often seen to be an important aspect of this revived national identity. Questions about how to maintain and stimulate democracy have indeed often been framed from the perspective of the nation state and concerns about the future of democracy and the future of the nation are related.

Concerns with regard to citizenship often focus on the decrease of the level of political participation and engagement by citizens. It is argued that this lack of civic engagement causes the "seemingly pervasive erosion of the social, political, economic and moral fabric" of nation states (Biesta and Lawy 63). This raises the question as to what kind of skills, knowledge, and attitudes are essential for citizens today. From this perspective, citizenship education becomes an important "tool" and civic literacy becomes a major "goal" and social issues are often related to education: "education is not dealing with a particular issue" or "education should perform better to deal with the issue." For example, students do not know "their" national history any more and new educational practices — such as student-centered education — are often held responsible for this collective amnesia (see, e.g., Postman). Further, a growing lack of civic engagement and civic literacy is a recurring concern in this educational "culture of complaint" (see Hughes) and these complaints are raised both in the public sphere, as well as in scholarship and there is an ongoing debate about the form, content, and function of civic literacy and civic education (see, e.g., Bloom; Hirsch). Despite the fact that the "evidence" about the decreasing levels of political interest and civic education remains largely insufficient at this stage, it is clear that students are targeted increasingly as "citizens in the making" by different governmental initiatives on civic education (Biesta and Lawy 64). This raises important questions about the kind of civic literacy that is taught and how this literacy is achieved. Peter Mortensen describes this as the "consequentialist discourse" in literacy studies leading to the question: "Does literacy have consequences, and if so, what are they?" (770). Gert Biesta and Robert Lawy argue that the question frames in a straightforward way that there is a clear and unproblematic definition of citizenship, so the only issue at stake is the way in which this kind of citizenship can be achieved through specific curricula and pedagogies. They continue that as a consequence, education is "instrumentalized" for achieving a particular kind of citizenship. This focus on citizenship-as-outcome causes a strong instrumental approach to citizenship education, emphasizing mainly the different ways to achieve citizenship rather than assessing critically what citizenship actually is or can be.

In our study we aim to move away from a straightforward definition of citizenship in general and civic literacy in particular by developing a rhetorical framework for a broader and more contextualized understanding of civic and cultural literacies. We explore specifically what this implies for contemporary humanist and liberal education. We concur with Biesta and Lawy that "a continuous interrogation of the possible meanings of citizenship, should be at the very centre of democratic life ... and at the very centre of citizenship education" (76). From this perspective, citizenship is no longer seen as "merely" a status that can be achieved, maintained, or lost, but it is conceptualized as a "practice" that is embedded in everyday life and this is related to a contextualized understanding of literacy: literacy is no longer seen as a neutral status to be achieved, but as a contextualized practice embedded in larger political and ideological understandings of what counts as literacy or illiteracy (see Mortensen). From this perspective, civic literacy is not a (natural) identity that one can achieve or lose, but is a process of identification (see Biesta and Lawy). Citizenship and civic literacy should therefore take different meanings, practices, and identities into account. We argue that rhetoric as a scholarly discipline and practice offers an important perspective to engage with a contextualized approach to citizenship and civic literacies (Kock and Villadsen).

The relationship between rhetoric, democracy, and politics has always been ambiguous: on the one hand, being able to argue and take part in public debate seems to be an essential ingredient of a healthy democracy and an *a priori* powerful tool to become a democratic "citizen." Rhetoric was in its origin related to the first experiments with democracy in classical Athens where being able to debate in public became an important aspect of becoming a competent citizen in a democratic society (notwithstanding that in Athens slaves and women were not included as citizens). On the other hand, politicians have always been confronted with doubts about the sincerity of their words and with the complaint that politicians are only concerned with words and not with deeds. The popular complaint "Let's cut the rhetoric and get down to some serious talk" was already uttered — as Wayne Booth points out — since "Socrates, quarrelling with the Sophists in Plato's *Phaedrus*, summarized his attack: 'He who would be a skillful rhetorician has no need of truth'" (x).

It may seem strange to turn to an "antiquated" and even a "discredited" discipline (Strecker and Tyler) for studies of contemporary politics and citizenship, but classical theories of rhetoric still provide us with useful principles and distinctions for studying civic affairs: "Where is the location and what is the use of power and authority? Where and what are the sources of premises? To what extent must political discourse exhibit truth and moral quality?" (Bitzer 1). Indeed, all the major classical rhetorical scholars such as Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian turned to rhetoric as the "principal" locus of rhetorical thought and communication (see Bitzer). At the same time, their rhetoric was significantly normative, treating rhetoric as an art and as a systematic method. This classical tradition can be confronted and complemented with contemporary approaches to rhetoric which emerged from the rhetorical turn in the human and social sciences.

The "rhetorical turn" has been described as a metadisciplinary move which sets rhetoric free "from its traditional confinement within the three distinctive fields of activity — education, politics and literature" (Gaonkar 59; also see Rutten), not by abandoning these fields but by refiguring them. Pioneering work was done by such scholars as Kenneth Burke, I.A. Richards, Richard McKeon, Chaim Perelman, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (for an overview see Cockcroft and Cockcroft; Bizell and Herzberg; Rutten). Because of the work of these scholars, the classical rhetorical canon has been revised and extended: "Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian were no longer the last word on rhetoric, but the first word in a whole new conversation about the ubiquity of rhetorical performances" (Tietge 6; also see Rutten and Soetaert). Perelman and Burke are two twentieth-century theorists whose work contains important insights for a rhetorical perspective to contemporary problems of citizenship. For Perelman — as Lloyd Bitzer argues — rhetoric is "the theory and practice of all argumentation which aims to secure the persuasion and conviction of audiences in political and other humane fields [and] rhetoric is at work whenever a writer or speaker seeks through argument to secure the assent of others to theses he advances" (Bitzer 3).

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The new rhetoric that Chaim Perelman developed aimed to cover the entire field of informal reasoning and therefore includes all forms of argumentation. Perelman argues that rhetoric has as its object "the study of discursive techniques functioning to provoke or increase the support of minds to the theses which one presents for approval" (129). From this perspective it is clear that rhetoric has a central role in politics. Further, Perelman argues that if a democratic regime is to function — with a minority that accepts the decisions of a majority — then the focus should be on values which are common to all members of a community. James Zappen, however, argues that this is still a rather traditional approach to rhetoric since it focuses on available means of persuasion based on established cultural values and that this implies a political practice aimed at a reaffirmation rather than questioning or critically assessing of the values. According to Zappen, Burke challenges this traditional perspective by seeking mutual accommodations or syntheses among multiple and potentially competing persuasive acts rather than looking for established cultural values. Indeed, Burke argues that rhetoric seeks to promote cooperation by use of symbolic, linguistic, and other strategies of identification. Thus, for Zappen rhetoric not only becomes a tool to overcome divisions between speaker and audience, but also a tool for confronting individual persuasive acts and for recognizing their inevitable partiality: this conceptualization of rhetoric encourages citizens to assess and question continuously their own points of view.

As posited above, there have always been important links between rhetoric, education, and democracy (on this, see Rutten and Soetaert): in its origin, rhetoric was related to specific virtues and thus became a central feature of classical civic education or *paideia*. There was an almost causal relationship between "good" education, "good" rhetoric, and "good" democracy (see Sproat; Woodruff). Classical rhetorical education has been described as a lifelong project, the goal of which was to develop a body of knowledge and technical proficiency, but, foremost, the aim was to become a certain kind of person (see Flemming). Specifically, education in rhetoric cultivates attitudes to participate in democratic processes. An education in rhetoric was seen as something more than a technical training, it was about the formation of citizens (Terrill 296). Paul Woodruff emphasizes that classical rhetorical education was the kind of education that aims to form better citizens. Rhetoric was considered not only as something that can be learned, but also as something that is essential (see Flemming; Rutten and Soetaert). This is of course a very positive reconstruction of the role of rhetoric in society. The historical relation between *paideia*, citizenship, and democracy also needs to be situated in an elitist and even non-democratic context and Terry Eagleton cautions us against "nostalgically resurrecting some Bakhtinian carnival of the word from the ancient Polis. It does not seem that Roman slaves had much chance of answering Cicero back" (90). However, there is consensus that classical education aimed to form citizens for an "emerging" democratic society and rhetoric was an important part of this (see Rutten and Soetaert). Alisdair Miller claims that liberal education was founded on the discipline of rhetoric the aim of which was moral, intellectual, and aesthetic identity formation. Within educational research, there is a range of conceptions and interpretations of the idea of such a character-forming education, specifically the German conception of *Bildung* with its focus on the moral, cognitive, aesthetic, and practical dimension of education (for a discussion of this, see, e.g., Westbury, Hopmann, Riquarts).

The above discussed perspectives raise the question "whether the concept of rhetoric and *paideia* — and by extension a curriculum centered on the humanities — still have any relevance today" (Miller 203). This can be related to Biesta's question as to "whether there is a future for the age-old educational ideal of *Bildung*" (343). Raising this question about the future of *Bildung* — we posit that this is equivalent to arguing about the future of rhetoric (see Rutten and Soetaert) — "means to ask what educational response would be appropriate in our time" (343). Indeed, what kind of cultural literacy do we need if we move away from a formal and utilitarian conception of citizenship and, instead, look at citizenship as a contextualized practice? What kind of cultural literacy do we need for a new perspective on citizenship? Perelman refers to the loss of a humanistic tradition when he contemplates on the fact that rhetoric ceased to play an essential part in education and Martha Nussbaum makes a persuasive case for the importance of the liberal

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arts at all levels of education. Nussbaum's arguments can be read as a plea for the revival of the humanities as an essential part of education which should aim to help students to become competent democratic citizens. According to Nussbaum, this major aim of education is in danger today — while her perspective is with focus on the U.S., the argument can be broadened to the whole world — because universities are cutting back funding continuously and increasingly of humanities programs. From different perspectives humanistic education is threatened, which urges Nussbaum to ask: "What will we have if these trends continue? Nations of technically trained people who don't know how to criticize authority, useful profit-makers with obtuse imaginations, technically trained lawyers who don't know how to understand and have concern for the communities they serve" (*Not for Profit* 172). The new buzzwords of our contemporary society are inspired by national and global economic growth: the focus is more and more on becoming economically productive citizens instead of becoming critical and empathetic citizens. Such a shift jeopardizes — according to Nussbaum — the hope for a decent society in a global world.

Against the growing managerial culture in education Nussbaum poses a humanist and cosmopolitan vision of higher education and suggests three abilities which she believes to be essential for developing a "decent" global citizenship: the first ability is Socratic self-criticism about one's own traditions. Democracy is based on critical citizens who can think for themselves and reason with others (avoiding simplistic debating with claims and counterclaims and political polarization). Training citizens for democracy in education implies engaging students to engage in deliberation and dialogue. Such training is about skills and knowledge, but also fosters an attitude not to see people with different points of view as opponents. The second ability for Nussbaum is to be able "to see oneself as a member of a heterogeneous nation, and world, understanding something of the history and character of the diverse groups that inhabit it" (*Not for Profit* 80). Schools are places — amongst others — where children are socialized suggesting a specific relation to the world. Nussbaum argues that "students should gradually come to understand both the differences that make understanding difficult between groups and nations and the shared human needs and interests that make understanding essential, if common problems are to be solved" (*Not for Profit* 81). This understanding of the world will promote human development only if it is itself inspired by critical thinking, thinking that learns to question and scrutinize historical evidence and to think independently about what the evidence supports. This perspective resonates with Burke's educational program which includes more than traditional methods such as debate and discussion. These methods are arranged in an educational ladder that should stimulate the confrontation of multiple perspectives on social reality: "one would try to decide how many 'voices' should represent different positions, and then create the possibility for each voice to state its position as clear as possible" (Burke, "Linguistic" 283–84). However, despite the fact that one should be as fair as possible in making it possible for each voice to state its position, the aim should not be mere fair play, but "one hopes for ways whereby the various voices, in mutually correcting one another, will lead toward a position better than anyone singly" (Burke, "Linguistic" 284).

The third ability for Nussbaum is to have a "narrative imagination": "to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (*Not for Profit* 95). Nussbaum argues that to see other human beings as full persons is not an automatic process and it is education that should promote and train such an attitude. It is clear that this is a kind of meta-ability for Nussbaum and serves as the basis for her defense of the importance of literature in education or an aesthetic education. Her defense of the importance of literature is combined with a plea for careful thinking about "ways of seeing" in general and "blind spots" in particular. This can of course be related to Burke's understanding of literature as equipment for living. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form* Burke describes literary art forms such as tragedy, comedy or satire as equipment for living which "size up" situations in various ways and refer to corresponding attitudes. He describes literature as a specific kind of "naming" that seeks to chart "type" situations. Zappen points out how Burke "views pure and applied literature not as antithetical but complementary: 'If there is to be a storm, poetry (pure literature) and propaganda



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(applied literature) will both deal with it ... The poet will prepare us for this storm by saying, 'Beware, a storm approacheth,' while the pamphleteer will handle the same matter by saying 'Go thou, and buy rubbers'" (748). Burke explains that "since the real world of action is so confused and complicated as to seem almost formless, and too extended and unstable for orderly observation ... [there is need for] a more limited material that might be representative of human ways while yet having fixity enough to allow for systematic examination" (Burke, "Linguistic" 263). From this perspective, "great dramas would be our equivalents of the laboratory experimenter's 'test cases'" (Burke, "Linguistic" 263; for an extended discussion about this, see Rutten).

In sum, Burke, Nussbaum — and many other scholars such as psychologist Jerome Bruner, literary critic Wayne Booth, and philosopher Richard Rorty — argue that the reflective skills we need to appreciate the complexity of particular situations could be educated through interaction with literary works (broadened towards other cultural artifacts). It is precisely through literature that we develop "the ability to understand and produce rhetorical style that captures the complex texture of the human condition [that] is essential to the full development of human character" (Sargent and Marshall 13). Kevin Sargent and Mason Marshall summarize Nussbaum as follows: "with these words Nussbaum beautifully captures the worldview of the classical humanist tradition. Part philosophy, part rhetoric, it calls for persons to be able to lead an 'examined life' that is not limited to the logical structures of propositional logic and dialectic method. It urges them to reflect upon the cultural products and social communities in which they live. It asks them to judge and act, to listen and express themselves" (13). Nussbaum claims that novels can be read as metaphors which help in understanding the stories of others and that literature should be used to help citizens to orient themselves cosmopolitically and to stimulate their moral imagination. Nussbaum started with focusing on the ethical dimensions of art — mainly literature — for our personal life, but later also focused on the more social and certainly political dimensions of literary culture. For Nussbaum reading great literature is essential to the development of a poetic justice or creating a moral and political vision of social justice. Nussbaum not only describes her work as "a project" and as a challenge to classical ideas about the function of art in democracy, but also as a critique on how our modern society has treated the arts and, more recently, she argued that democracies need the humanities (i.e., in *Not for Profit*). Indeed, it is a "project" that can also be linked to the ethical and rhetorical turn in literary theory. Further, in *The Company We Keep* Booth argues for the relocation of ethics to the center of our engagement with literature to explore not only the potential dangers, but also the ethical powers of works that are part of the literary canon.

Of course, we need to look at the matter from all sides. Literary culture and literature education also have to be situated in the context of social structures. Eagleton refers to the ideology of literature and claims that social structures as for example the nation state use literature as a "moral technology [that] consists of a particular set of techniques and practices for the instilling of specific kinds of value, discipline, behavior, and response in human subjects" (96-97; see also Rutten, Soetaert, Vandermeersche <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1709>>). This technology produces a specific kind of knowledge which serves "certain functions of power" that are "vital to the ends of social order" (Eagleton 97). Eagleton emphasizes that this moral technology is not just the "simple communication of a range of practical moral values, such as authority is good or evil" (98) but that it is more subtle and elusive because it teaches one to *be* "moral." Paradoxically, a confrontation with literature can help to acquire a meta-perspective on the nation as a construction and stimulate our moral imagination, but at the same time traditional literature played an important role for the construction of our national, cultural, and geographic "imagined communities" (Anderson).

As Nathan Crick points out, there is undeniably attractiveness and nobility to the humanist rhetorical tradition for contemporary discussions about democracy and rhetoric and he refers to Ronald Greene to argue that this tradition "tends to posit a heroic notion of the humanistic self-capable of using an aesthetically formed moral discourse to emancipate others from their social binds. In short, it ignores the more pervasive technological and economic influences and constraints that form the self within concrete sets of power relations" (3). Actually, Greene goes even further by arguing that this view of the heroic rhetorician and "the tendency to translate

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communication into an aesthetic moral theory of eloquent citizenship puts argumentation studies to work for, rather than against, new forms of bio-political control" (Greene qtd. in Crick 3). From this perspective, Crick argues that "if rhetoric is to function as a means to radical democracy, it must find a way to reassert its status as art ... in this sense the Sophists were not democrats because they provided citizens the means of speech, they were democrats because they provided citizens the means of artistic self mastery that enabled the flourishing of the practices of freedom at least for a slightly wider group of Athenian males" (5). Indeed, a focus on rhetoric, we postulate, also urges us as scholars of rhetoric to take a step aside. We cannot celebrate rhetoric without also looking at its downside and possible derailments. In addressing the 'Janus-like' features of rhetoric, Antonio de Velasco and Melody Lehn raise the following questions: "Does rhetoric civilize? Or does it repress and control? Or both? What is the price of community gained through the language of social control? What is the limit of dissent expressed through the language of difference and personal deliberation?" (2).

Emphasizing the rhetorical nature of a curriculum, Patricia Bizell and Bruce Herzberg propose that we need a positive utopian moment in criticism and that we need to take the next step in our rhetorical turn: "we will have to be more forthright about the ideologies we support as well as those we attack, and we will have to articulate a positive program legitimated by an authority that is nevertheless non-foundational. We must help our students, and our fellow citizens, to engage in a rhetorical process that can collectively generate trustworthy knowledge and beliefs" (384). The central realm of rhetoric — and liberal education in general — is thus the practical world of human affairs: "Here, rhetoric labors between the challenge and the fitting response, the imperfection and the remedy, the crisis and the calm. This, Kenneth Burke colorfully remarked, is the area of the human barnyard" (Bitzer 8).

The necessity to develop a theoretical and methodological framework for the contextualized understanding of citizenship and civic literacies implies a move away from analyses which evaluate critically the rhetoric of education to a focus on how the linguistic and symbolic framing of educational issues (theory) shapes and influences educational attitudes and practices. Studying the rhetoric of education is not merely about the "proper use of language," but starts from the recognition that the "concepts we have available to us ... in education in a very fundamental sense structure what we can say, think, and do and therefore also impact upon what cannot be said, thought and done" (Biesta 2). Analyzing citizenship and civic education as a rhetorical practice is important because "the failure to examine the rhetorical practices of education limits the understanding of the process in play, the possibilities for education and the ways we engage in and with it" (Edward, Nicoll, Solomon, Usher 11). Because rhetorical strategies can only be effective under specific circumstances, it is important for every actor involved in education "to increase awareness of the various inter-related arts of rhetoric that are incorporated in the daily practices of planning, teaching, and learning" (St. Maurice 51). Furthermore, rhetoric can help in addressing the normative questions that are part of our continuous discussions and deliberations about education in general and civic education in particular (see Biesta). Examining civic education as a rhetorical practice can help in understanding the persuasiveness of cultural and normative conceptions of what counts as citizenship and, more broadly, what counts as cultural literacy. By exposing possible limitations, alternative constructions and configurations of civic literacy can be considered.

A rhetorical perspective could make us aware of how we construct binaries in the educational debate to solve complex problems by suggesting simple solutions, for example the debate between knowledge versus skills, content versus motivation, books versus digitalization, etc. As far as civic education is concerned the same binaries emerge: us versus others, nation versus other nations, nation versus globalization, etc. We should realize that our ways of life "depend upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depend as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation" (Bruner 25). This should not imply relativism or conservatism; instead, our suggestion is to introduce perspectives on perspectives in the curriculum, a site where theory and practice intersect and where different discourses, disciplines, and ideologies are mediated. Rhetoric as a perspective on perspectives can make us



aware of what Burke called our "terministic screens" (*Language* 28) and these screens are different for different people: for some, democracy evokes patriotic sentiments while for others it suggests global perspectives, for some, the example of ancient Athens is the basis for conservative ideas for education while for others it is the cradle for progressive thought, and for some, morality is about strict rules while for others it is about complex values. We argue that rhetoric and art can equip us for dealing with such complexities, but — there is always a "but" in the rhetorical turn — there is no guarantee. It is "a project" in which ways of seeing are confronted with different ways of not seeing. A "comparative" perspective is thus, in our view, an important principle for confronting cultural literacy and citizenship. Booth links the comparative perspective with a plea for the importance of critical pluralism: "let the voices multiply, the more voices we have, the more truth will finally emerge" (4). Such a statement can be linked to the plea for encouraging intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue based on comparative cultural studies and this perspective changes our perception of the curriculum in general and civic education in particular. Citizenship and education share the fact that they are best framed as "unending conversations."

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