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How To Talk Ethically

Cultivating the Digital Citizen through *Eloquentia Perfecta*

By Morgan T. Reitmeyer and Susan A. Sci

Universities are faced with the challenges posed by the highly mediated culture embraced by our students and the need to adapt older pedagogical models to our new globally networked society. Some Jesuit institutions, including Regis University, are adapting the classical concept of *eloquentia perfecta* during students' initial exposure to collegiate life.

First-year experience programs are typically designed to expose freshman to the kinds of writing and speaking skills needed to synthesize ideas and demonstrate mastery of course content. The disciplinary separation between English and communication means that the inter-connected processes of writing and speaking are often presented to students as separate acts. Students learn composition and speech as grounded in distinct academic areas, taught in completely different courses. Highlighting the differences

between these skills does a disservice to students given the increased reliance on digital media including videos, websites, blogs, and social media which seamlessly combine writing and speaking. The concept of *eloquentia perfecta* can be used as a founding principle for first-year experience programs since it enables faculty to address the traditional isolation of these two fields, ultimately giving students more tools to succeed in a digital world.

By promoting "perfect eloquence" as a foundational first-year principle, Jesuit institutions can cultivate students' practice of graceful communication, and bind the act of communicating to a larger calling: civic engagement and the common good. *Eloquentia perfecta* shifts the classroom focus from students' proficiency in disciplinary content (i.e., English and communica-

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Regis University.

tion) for solely scholarly purposes to a commitment towards social justice. The tradition of *eloquentia perfecta* was incorporated to help students develop the composition and speaking skills needed to address political, social, and cultural issues in a uniquely ethical manner – focusing on the needs of the community over the desires of the self.

When students can imagine a more “just society,” and learn how to eloquently describe their vision in writing and speech, it helps them create shared meaning with others regarding the type of community they collectively want to live in. The vast array of digital media our students use every day can be invaluable for reaching a wide, diverse audience. What being a “just society” means increasingly is debated and negotiated in virtual media.

In first-year experience programs that focus on *elo-*

quentia perfecta as a foundation for composition and speech, faculty members can reframe students’ relationship to digital media as a civic platform on which they can publicly share their written and spoken work. There is an inherently civic quality to our interactive, digital, and networked culture. News is no longer something to simply consume; rather it is something to which we are compelled to respond within a wide array of media. We can comment, blog, dig, pin, tweet, or create memes and video about current events, social issues, and political policy.

Our digital culture is a space in which private individuals can have a public voice, in text and video, as they intentionally share in conversation with a community. Current technological advances allow audiences to be engaged as digital citizens, urging individuals to join in public discourse. *Eloquentia perfecta* as a guiding principle for first year experience programs provides a vibrant framework for students as digital citizens and offers them a more nuanced understanding of speaking and composing as inter-connected, complex, applied acts. As students engage audience members outside of the classroom on real-world issues, they begin to understand that although the principles of good communication may be considered universal, the application of them is concertedly contextual.

For example, students participating in a forum on ImmigrationVoice.org regarding H.R. 3012, the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act, are encouraged to cultivate analysis—the ability to understand a community’s competing values affecting this legislation—as well as good writing skills. Since the forum will abjure members who engage poorly, students must be knowledgeable, ethical, and eloquent to remain in the dialogue. When a faculty member has students create and post video blogs about immigration to YouTube, he/she is encouraging a very public form of oral argument. Students must research, write, edit, practice, and deliver their claims, and constructively respond to feedback. These videos may be posted and reposted by viewers, which is an added incentive for students to make sure their content is well constructed and provocative.

Jesuit universities, like Fordham, Loyola Marymount, and Regis, are using the concept of *eloquentia perfecta* to bring the acts of writing and speaking in concert. They invite increasingly complex civil spaces of communication into the first-year classroom. Ultimately, through the principles of *eloquentia perfecta* our 21st century students will become active digital citizens and continue their critical engagement well beyond their collegiate careers. ■

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