

## Contributors

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# Leadership and Liberal Arts in an Age of Smart Machines And Dull People: A Call for the Rhetors

When our corporate leaders make strategic decisions that change the lives of workers, our nation, and our environment, they decide with the resources their MBA degrees have provided. They have computer generated charts and graphs, complete with in-depth statistical analyses and conclusions made with the latest decision making models. They make the "bottom line" for the next quarterly report so clear and so rational that only those who would wildly abandon conventional wisdom reject the "obviously best" decisions. No doubt our national wealth and productivity have increased by using computers and the models are "smarter" than those who use them, if those leaders know only their immediate, parochial perspectives, if they manifest weaknesses in the basic processes of reasoning and communication, then I doubt if they can promote the long term welfare of the worker, our nation, and the human family, no matter what machines and models they use. I ask specifically, is there a place in the corporate board rooms of America for the perspectives of Pericles, Petrarch, and Descartes? Is there a place and a need for the canons of rhetoric and philosophy to converse with the canons of managing productivity, profits, and personnel?

As past cultural crises called for "rhetors" who in turn led their generations into the Classical Golden Age, the Renaissance, and the Age of Enlightenment, I suggest you can hear a similar call today. The title of this editorial comes from two keynote addresses delivered recently at the first Liberal Arts and Business Symposium, sponsored by the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Dean Larry Ratner of the UTK College of Liberal Arts spoke on "Making Connections: Leadership and Liberal Arts." Dean Warren Neel of the UTK College of Business Administration spoke on "The Post-Industrial Society: Age of Smart Machines and Dull People." The more I reflected on their comments the more I experienced those comments as a call for "rhetors" to intervene in a cultural crisis. I address my comments, therefore, to the academic descendents of those ancient, medieval, and early modern rhetors who today teach speech communication to college and university students.

Dean Neel summarized the crisis in one statement: "Smart machines and dull people do not advance humanity." He claims we have lost our human identities to serve a post-industrial society, thus producing professionals lacking personal balance, roots, and a sense of identity. We enjoy freedom of the body in our work with our smart machines, but we have failed to produce the quality of mind and spirit needed to enjoy freedom of the mind.

Patricia Galagan, editor of *Training and Development Journal*, echoes Dean Neel's disturbing statements in the July, 1988 issue. She tells us that "Companies hunt for talent in a labor pool that can't read, write, or reason well enough for today's lowest level jobs." She quotes from a report prepared by The Committee for Economic Development, an independent research group of 200 business executives and educators. Their research indicates that our schools "send into the workforce a steady supply of unmotivated youth who are incapable of appropriate behavior on the job and unable to solve problems, make decisions, or set priorities."

At first reading I tend to react to such claims as incredible and to depreciate them as the exaggerations of alarmists. But, when reaction gives way to reflective response, my experiences as a teacher of the youth Neel and Galagan describe confirm the reality of the crisis. This confirmation raises the question as to how this crisis came to be. Dean Ratner suggested that since the late 1940's college enrollment has increased 400 percent, and "to the degree that the liberal arts were found by post-World War II students to lack practical value or relevancy, the liberal arts were pushed aside." These students do not see nor seek the relationship between principles of accounting, business policy, statistics and the humane study of the art of discourse, nor do they believe such a relationship exists. When have you heard these future leaders of business, industry, and government tell you that they enrolled in your speech class to become "good people speaking well," or to remedy their neglect of the art of rhetoric so that in the market place of ideas "truth will triumph over error, justice over injustice, knowledge over ignorance"? Do you hear expressed an interest in the study and practice of communication as preparation for excellence in civic virtue? Almost never do current students express such goals for their enrollment in liberal arts courses. I suggest that speech teachers hear college students most frequently state that they enrolled in speech class in order "to get it out of the way." Their concept of the liberal arts resembles their concept of getting the chicken pox. Once you get the pox out of the way you can forget it and move on to the important things of adulthood!

I believe Dean Neel identified this disregard for the liberal arts when he argued that our current crisis has resulted because "we have blindly accepted progress without definition and assumed that the single dimension of wealth is the sole measure of progress." A humane definition of "progress" and a humane perspective on the place of wealth in the life of an individual or a society will not come from technical, statistical, or professional course work, especially if the students' frame of orientation for life is to be left alone to accumulate the greatest wealth in the shortest time with the least bother. The liberal arts can provide the needed humaneness, but only when teachers and students approach them as seriously as they pursue personal wealth and power. Unfortunately, even the teaching profession has been ambivalent and weak in demanding that the liberal arts occupy their needed position and perform their necessary role in students' learning experiences. Dean Neel argued that our current higher educational institutions have exacerbated the problem and "have sanctioned self-serving purposes to achieve success."

From many reputable sources we have, therefore, these warnings: America cannot remain strong if we continue to graduate from college into the labor force incompetent thinkers, communicators, and problem solvers; American colleges and universities must not fail to meet the challenge of this crisis. Dean Ratner has wisely suggested that to teach the liberal arts to current students "we must respond to their goals and needs, to who they are." He argued that teachers of the liberal arts must find and teach "the many ways in which the past serves as a guide to the present. . . make connections between values drawn from the past and the lives our students lead." The wisdom and necessity of this proposal has few, if any, serious enemies except our own lack of ability and/or concern to operationalize it. You have to care deeply to invest the time, expense, and energy such a proposal requires. In short, I am not convinced that we know how to interface the canons of rhetoric and philosophy with the canons of managing productivity, profits, and personnel, nor that we care enough to bring Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian into the same board room with Weber, Taylor, and Herzberg.

On the other hand, I am also convinced that our discipline, rooted in the study and teaching of speech communication as a liberal art, has prepared us for this crisis and has developed within us a profound caring for our students, our profession, and our national welfare. What may seem therefore, a formidable task may be our time of opportunity. Consider the skills and attitudes business leaders tell us they need in our graduates. Galagan reported that The Committee for Economic Development surveyed thousands of employers and they found that employers need potential employees who strive to do work well, set priorities, work well with others, communicate, and learn to learn. Galagan also reported that the Rand Corporation described the needed skills and attitudes of potential employees as cooperation, team problem finding and solving, communication, decision-making, commitment, confidence in abilities, and boldness in developing ideas and approaches. Everything in these lists of skills and attitudes falls within the rhetorical canons that rhetoricians have practiced, taught, and researched for centuries. From our basic communication skills class to the doctorate we facilitate the development of these skills and attitudes in ourselves and in our students. We can, therefore, bring together the humane study of communication and the professional study of vocational skills and technology, and we can graduate "smart people into a work world of smart machines." Pericles can converse with Parkinson, Socrates with Sloan, and Aristotle with Argyris.

I suggest that the Tennessee Speech Communication Association can and should provide educational leadership toward the development of courses of study, teaching methods and materials, and research that help to remedy the crisis of dull people operating smart machines. The president of TSCA or an appointee can develop an agenda for discussion and planning, and call together the chairpersons or appointees from college and university speech communication departments and business leaders. This group can plan and schedule a conference-symposium to examine and begin to resolve the crisis facing us in the area of "Leadership and Liberal Arts in an Age of Smart Machines and Dull People."

On the other hand we can continue with business as usual and miss an opportunity to practice those civic virtues, to implement those humane values, and to employ those communication skills that make us contemporary rhetors. If we ignore this opportunity, then future historians may identify us with the vacuity of the sophists rather than the prudence of the rhetors. Such a failure most certainly will classify us with Kurt Vonnegut's hero in *Mother Night* as "a man who served evil too openly and good too secretly, the crime of his times."

