



SPHERE

Teaching Civic
Culture Together

Teachers as Rhetoricians

BY KOBI NELSON

Overview

Every day, you create meaningful connections with a wide variety of people. From facilitating robust classroom discussions with students to engaging in thoughtful exchanges with parents to planning collaboratively with colleagues, your work thrives on communication. You are constantly engaging hearts and minds, meaning each moment offers an opportunity to spark ideas and inspire action. This is where developing your rhetorical skill set is invaluable.

What Is a Rhetorician?

Aristotle stated that rhetoric is “the faculty of discovering in any particular case all the available means of persuasion.” Rhetorical skills aren’t just for politicians or debate teams. Rhetoric is at the core of what makes educators like you excellent. For instance, those moments when you imagine diverse student perspectives on a lesson so you can anticipate questions or reflect on past lessons to improve your pedagogy—this is internal rhetoric, your inner dialogue that takes teaching challenges and turns them into opportunities for connection. This internal conversation becomes the foundation for authentic communication with others. The more you cultivate this reflective practice, the more you’ll discover effective ways to build understanding and inspire action—the essence of being an impactful rhetorician.

Essential Rhetorical Skills for Educators

While standing in front of a classroom often feels like the most visible form of rhetoric, three equally powerful rhetorical skills can enhance both your impact and your credibility as an educator:

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence is particularly vital for educators who regularly navigate various situations. This skill enables you to recognize and manage your emotional responses

effectively so that you can respond to others with cognitive and affective empathy. When you acknowledge the role your beliefs play in your responses, you enhance your ability to address conflicts constructively. This emotional awareness doesn't just defuse tensions; it strengthens your credibility and contributes positively to your relationships and the teaching profession as a whole.

LISTENING WITH CURIOSITY AND OPENNESS

Rhetorical listening encompasses a range of approaches that extend well beyond simply hearing what others say. The most effective rhetoricians develop the capacity to listen with authentic curiosity and openness, which necessitates a willingness to ask questions and acknowledge the limits of one's own understanding. This, however, often requires educators to be willing to be vulnerable and ask questions. While this may present challenges in educational environments that typically value definitive answers, this listening approach serves as a powerful tool for building authentic connections and enhancing your ability to navigate complex professional interactions.

FAIR-MINDED CRITICAL THINKING

Fair-minded critical thinking is essential for educators who aim to create environments where diverse viewpoints are thoughtfully considered. Building upon the foundation of curious and open listening, this skill involves careful reflection on how one processes and evaluates information. Rather than selectively attending to information that validates existing perspectives, fair-minded critical thinking encourages questioning and clarification to deepen understanding. The goal shifts from a self-interested desire to win an argument to developing mutual understanding between stakeholders. When educators model and practice this skill, they strengthen educational communities, enhancing their ability to address complex challenges productively.

Being an Effective Rhetorician Begins with You

Your effectiveness as an educator and a rhetorician is strengthened by cultivating awareness of your internal dialogue. Consider: What stories do you tell yourself about challenging situations? How do you mentally rehearse or rehash difficult conversations? What narratives run through your mind as you reflect on your lessons? These internal conversations create the foundation for everything that follows.

When you bring awareness to your own internal dialogues, you begin to see how each person in your educational community—from students struggling with complex concepts to colleagues with different viewpoints—brings their own internal rhetoric to every interaction. Your recognition of this shared humanity can create common ground and build

bridges across differences. Thus, challenging conversations become opportunities for connection and growth.

The thoughtful rhetorical practices you make each day, whether inviting diverse viewpoints, asking clarifying questions, or taking a moment to listen with curiosity, carries significance beyond the classroom walls. These choices help construct the foundation necessary to form educational communities that value diverse perspectives and thoughtful engagement with complex ideas. When educators model these skills, civil discourse becomes more than just an aspiration; it becomes a lived reality where meaningful discussions take root and flourish.