Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of . . .

Rosa A. Eberly, Brad Serber


Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/jge.2013.0028

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jge/summary/v062/62.4.eberly.html
Copyright © 2013 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pa.

LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF . . .

Rosa A. Eberly and Brad Serber

ABSTRACT
With the hope of inspiring readers to reimagine the centrality of general education in constituting young adult capacities to create and sustain collective self-governance, this essay describes two courses and one activity built around public problems. General education viewed as a human right as well as a shared responsibility can thus serve as a college-level introduction to the habits and pleasures of lifelong collaborative learning, illustrating education’s centrality in constituting the future of participatory democracy.

So let us wage a glorious struggle against illiteracy, poverty and terrorism, let us pick up our books and our pens; they are the most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world. Education is the only solution. Education first.

—Malala Yousafzai, “Malala Yousafzai Addresses United Nations Youth Assembly,” 2013

And, of course, an educated public is fundamental, you know, to democracy.

—Seyla Benhabib, on “Democracy in Trouble,” Diane Rehm Show, 2013

Among the few consistently civil, intelligent, and well-informed talk radio hosts in the United States, Diane Rehm (2002) is herself a paradigm of the power of
public education to help create and sustain collective civic life. In May 2013, Rehm hosted one of her two, daily, one-hour programs on the topic “Democracy in Trouble.” The program took its exigence from a recently released report, The Democratic Disconnect (Benhabib et al., 2013), funded by the Transatlantic Academy of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Rehm’s guests were E. J. Dionne of the Brookings Institution and the Washington Post, Moisés Naím of the Carnegie Endowment and El País, and Seyla Benhabib of Yale University, who is also a senior fellow at the Transatlantic Academy. Benhabib explained that the Transatlantic Academy was founded in 2007 in response to “a lot of concern during the first George W. Bush administration that the rift between Europe and the United States, in terms of understanding one another on political and other matters, was growing” (“Democracy,” 2013). The conversation continued:

Rehm: The report, as I understand it, is titled “The Democratic Disconnect.”
Tell us briefly about the conclusion . . .

Benhabib: Yes. Maybe historical perspective would permit us to understand this angst about democracy is not new. In the 1930s, democracies were threatened by the rise of collectivist, fascist movements: Mussolini’s Italy, National Socialism in Germany and Stalin’s Russia, etc. This is not the threat to democracies today, neither is the threat as the Trilateral Commission report of the 1970 said, ungovernability.

Rather what we see with “the democratic disconnect” is that . . . the concern of the citizenry for the common good is eroding. Trust in government is eroding, and also the capacity of institutions to deliver is eroding. And so we use several metaphors to express a challenge, this challenge. We say citizens have left the building. There is a scattering of political impulses.

. . . [T]here are democratic energies. On the part of the younger generation, there is significant Internet activism. There are challenges posed to government accountability with movements such as transparency. And yet, at the same time, “the democratic disconnect” seems to be that the formal institutions of government are in sort of atrophy, that there doesn’t seem to be a movement for institutional reform or constitutional passions. (“Democracy,” 2013)

Rehm’s informative program is well worth an hour for anyone interested in the challenges of global democracy. However, given the host and the panelists, among them “distinguished academics” (Dionne, 2013), it was surprising to hear neither Rehm nor her guests make other than passing mention of education.
Of course, yoking the topoi “democracy” and “trouble”—with or without that pesky third term, education—has generated copious cautions for centuries in various languages and cultures. Thus, it is perhaps understandable that the “education” topos did not make the conversational canon. Still, Plato’s censorious proscriptions against some of the earliest Western direct democracies form the foundations of canonical Western thought. Early English vernacular writers’ warnings about free speech and liberal education inspired John Milton’s defenses in “Areopagitica” and Of Education (see 2011). Throughout the twentieth century, ambivalences about democracy echo not only in John Dewey’s famously indeterminate observation that “the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy” (1927, p. 146) but also in an infamous Winston Churchill speech before the House of Commons in 1947: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (James, 1974, p. 7566). Even the U.S. Constitution, an Enlightenment document that has more or less perdured for two and a quarter centuries, exhibits in its original omissions the perils as well as the promises of democracy. We return to that particular Constitution—and constitutions in general—later in the essay.

Meanwhile, the twenty-first century has, alas, brought no resolution to these ambivalences inherent in democracy. Indeed, as part of “modernity,” democracy’s recent fits and starts across North Africa and the Middle East, particularly when ignorantly perpetuated by the United States at the end of a gun or the strike of a drone, threaten to cause fundamental backlash against the very idea of informed self-governance (see, e.g., Youssef, 2013). All of this is to say that we neither assume nor assert any moral high ground about the United States as a polity or about what might remain of our participatory democracy in the age of Citizens United (Kennedy, 2010) and the contemporary surveillance state. We do, however, persist in what Robert Westbrook has called “democratic hope” (2005), especially in our capacities as educators.

Nonetheless, the second epigraph to this article suggests how readily assumed but rarely examined the powers particular to education are in effecting and sustaining a self-governing polity. This essay sets out to inspire readers to reconsider the centrality of general education in students’—particularly young adults’ and even more particularly subaltern young adults’—capacities to create and sustain collective self-governance. Further, it asserts that education—and, in particular, general education—is itself a human right. By explicating two rhetoric courses (the first briefly) and a recurring activity transportable to courses in any discipline, this essay urges readers to consider confronting collaboratively with colleagues and students difficult and controversial topics—what sociologist
Joseph Gusfield (1980) has called “public problems” and what designers and planners often call “wicked problems” (Rittel, 1973)—thereby making their own campuses and communities, in the words of Louis Brandeis (1932) and Jeremy Cohen (2006), “laboratories of democracy.”

Developing curricula and teaching in a way that promotes sustainable publics and healthy democracies can be particularly difficult when U.S. higher education has become thoroughly corporatized and privatized, even at so-called public universities. Further, curricular innovations most prized by corporate universities are too often only those that fit within institutions’ public relations or fund-raising goals, also working against engagement with the genuinely “wicked problems” most communities—and certainly higher education—face. Finally, as higher education moves ever more rapidly toward majority non-tenure-line faculty positions that guarantee neither academic freedom nor even minimal job security, faculty and administrators might shy away more than ever from controversy. Humbly, we would suggest that attempting to compromise with those outside academia who have tried to control or destroy higher education has not improved our institutions’—or our students’—situations. We suggest, instead, embracing higher education’s democratic capacities by providing students the agency to find, inform, and use their individual and collective voices.

In that context, we below describe two courses at two large, exclusive, flagship U.S. research universities: the first briefly and the second, and more recent, at some length. The courses, as well as the transportable constitutional activity with which the article concludes, set out to provide students the opportunity to gain agency in ways of their own deliberation and choosing to address what they collaboratively identify as common, shared, public problems (Eberly, 2004, 2006). In order to be—literally—deliberating bodies, students and other citizens need to have and recognize that they have some genuine agency beyond consumer and spectator. That is to say, in order truly to deliberate, people need a matter that they together can affect about which to deliberate. Deliberation in general education classroom settings has the advantage of instructors who can model real-time information-seeking behaviors and who can act as collaborative learners rather than as tyrants of truth. Constructive deliberation is as much about shared fact-gathering, fact-checking, and definitional clarity as it is about making evaluations and advocating for policies (Corbett & Eberly, 2001; Eberly, 1999). Especially as late capitalist political economies of media reduce access to credible news sources, and collaborative filtering techniques bombard “Inter-web” users with “news” reflecting only their previous browsing habits, adequate self-education becomes ever more challenging. Thus, collaborative education
and deliberation in face-to-face spaces—particularly about collectively identified public problems—become all the more vital.

School Shootings, Rhetorical Influence, Public Violence

After teaching a course on the University of Texas (UT) Tower shootings and public memory from 1996 to 2001 (Eberly 2002, 2008), Eberly decided during summer 2012 to offer a similar course at Penn State University the following spring semester. The University of Texas course provided clear evidence of the educational benefits of encouraging students to deliberate about public, common, shared (in ancient Greek, \textit{koinē}) problems. Among their many other accomplishments over the years, students in “the Tower course” created the first public memory Web site (in 1996) out of concern that while the shooter was remembered, his victims were not; collaborated on commemoration activities with Texas A&M students after a bonfire collapse there killed several students and traumatized the university community; proposed an educational memorial to the shooting victims that would educate wider publics on gun violence; and (mysteriously) published in the student newspaper (circulation thirty thousand) a twenty-four-page, independently produced publication devoted to the reopening of the tower observation deck. They titled their magnum opus “Our Tower.”

As humanists who share a department with social scientists, Eberly and Serber understand the shortcomings of anecdotal evidence. Still, to assist in suggesting the kinds of positive consequences for students that imagining the classroom as a protopublic space can have, a former student agreed to share here an e-mail she sent in July 2012:

Hello, Professor Eberly,
I’ve been thinking a lot about our class in the Spring of 1999 that coincided with Columbine. The events in Aurora, Colorado, have been especially interesting to me. Not only have I continued to study people who do these kinds of things, but I’ve also established solid roots in the Denver area, which makes this one feel close to home. In the last year, I’ve started working at various film festivals, including Sundance. I got to see “We Need to Talk About Kevin,” which, if you haven’t seen it, is a captivating and frightening visual representation of these sorts of massacres. It focuses on the childhood, but it also delves into the aftermath as well, which is an aspect that is rarely covered. It is based on a book, but I haven't read it yet. In the wake of this most recent event, I am morbidly fascinated by the little tidbits that are revealed. I compare them to the previous cases and try to wrap my
head around what leads someone to that path . . . just like everyone else seems to be doing. Like the rest of the world, I’m still processing, as I’m sure we all will be in the days, weeks, months, and years to come. . . .

Of course, your Penn State campus certainly had its fair share of news today. While the punishment of [the] football program for covering up a child abuse scandal is nothing to trivialize, a mass shooting for some reason feels rawer, more visceral. . . .

I feel like I’m rambling. I don’t really have anything specific to say, but I did want you to know that many of the things we discussed in class and outside of it some 13 years ago are still very much a part of my life. I think about you from time to time and miss our chats in your office. I hope you are well.
All the best,
April

Largely based on what Eberly learned with and from students in the six years she taught “the Tower course” at UT-Austin, this new course would focus as much on deliberation about causes and solutions as on studies of public memory. In the years since Columbine, “school shooting” had, alas, become a genre of public violence. Previous experience suggested (Eberly 2002, 2008) that among the best places to study and attempt to address public problems in a way that can help grow and sustain the habits of participatory democracy is in undergraduate rhetoric classrooms.

Eberly invited Serber, then her newest doctoral advisee, to sit in on as much of the class as he wished, given their shared research interests and interdisciplinary rhetoric backgrounds. She made very clear that he “was not the TA”; indeed, Serber was on fellowship and thus forbidden to engage in formal instruction, a distinction undergraduates struggled to remember in an institutional culture where many, many more undergraduate courses are taught by graduate students and nontenured faculty than by tenured or tenure-line faculty members.

Our class found an even more urgent exigence on December 14, 2012. Preparing to teach a course about school shootings less than a month after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, would be even more anxiety-ridden than taking on, as Eberly and her students had at Texas, a university’s most fatal historic moment. Despite our enthusiasm to grapple with difficult subject matter in an attempt to better understand rhetorical influences on public violence, we worried. Could we really handle the emotional labor we were about to bring upon ourselves and our students? What if exposing students to violent subjects traumatized or retraumatized students?
Or us? What about students who had been victims of violence? What if, heaven forbid, public violence happened again on our campus or in our classroom?

As we continued to plan the class in the weeks after Sandy Hook, our syllabus seemed to expand every hour (see the appendix). After the semester began, a virtually endless stream of additional school shootings and other acts of public violence followed. Journalists, historians, and commentators tracked and released historical and contemporary accounts of gun control and gun violence in the United States and abroad. President Obama made gun violence a major theme of his 2013 State of the Union address. Frantic, opportunistic federal, state, and local lawmakers assembled committees and drafted myriad proposals. Op-ed pages, social media, cable news, and other more or less public forums filled with people talking around each other rather than listening to each other. Meanwhile, conspiracy theorists denied that the Sandy Hook shootings had happened as they were reported and claimed that the deaths of twenty-six children and adults were a federal government conspiracy (Nyhan, 2013). We could not have asked for a better moment in which to teach a course on rhetoric and school shootings—or a worse one.

We spent much of the first day of class making sure that students were prepared to spend fifteen weeks studying school shootings. We made it clear that we would not take it personally if they were not up to the challenge. A few students dropped but, significantly in the context of agency and discourse-generation, e-mailed Eberly or Serber to explain their decisions, some expressing anxiety about dwelling with the topic of the course for an entire semester. For the twenty who stayed, attendance often fell short of our expectations (and the requirements of the syllabus), contrary to a wise comment one of us received from a third party: students studying school shootings might well realize how fortunate they are to be able to attend classes. However, those who stayed and attended regularly learned, questioned, presented, wrote, and deliberated together in ways that made their work potentially matter outside the classroom.

We began by trying to slow down the many fast-paced public conversations already happening in the aftermath of Sandy Hook. Using Corbett and Eberly’s *The Elements of Reasoning* (2001) as a guiding text, we focused heavily on stasis theory, which helps arguers isolate the different kinds of claims about which people disagree and can work to agree (fact/conjecture, definition, value, causes/consequences, and policy). Often jumping immediately to causal/consequential claims (e.g., “Violent media cause school shootings”) or policy claims (e.g., “School districts should allow teachers to carry concealed handguns”), many arguments circulating via broadcast and digital media sought undefined solutions to unclearly analyzed problems. However, as we discussed in class, causal
relationships are usually quite complicated, and hastily made policy proposals do not necessarily yield sustainable results. Moreover, as the stasis questions are often intertwined, the other stases very much matter (e.g., the definitional question about what “the right to bear arms” means or the value question of “whether having armed guards in every classroom is a good idea”). By explicating and analyzing arguments in terms of the stasis questions, students were able to step back and reflect more critically upon the complex problems that school shootings pose and to listen for places to begin constructive conversations rather than jump into the roiling sea of public discourse only to add more uninformed opinions.

In addition to stasis theory, we devoted part of the course to studying public memory. Through some historical background and student work from the previous course on the UT Tower shootings, we discussed challenges related to remembering and forgetting traumatic events, media ethics, the influence of institutional and corporate power over memory, and how to memorialize an event in a way that emphasizes victims over villains. Additionally, we explored how fictional representations of school shootings can augment public discourse and the extent to which a president can heal local communities as well as a grieving nation through a national eulogy.

Students read the U.S. Constitution—most for the first time. Unlike in the activity described below, in this course we spent only a few days on the Constitution and focused our efforts on the Preamble and the Bill of Rights. Serber led class discussions of the book *Hit Man: A Technical Manual for Independent Contractors* (Feral, 1983) in the context of *Rice v. Paladin Enterprises* (128 F. 3d 233 [4th Cir. 1997]), in which relatives of a murder victim sued a publishing company for printing and profiting from a manual instructing, as the title suggests, people how to kill people for money. The class engaged in conversations not only about the relationship between words and violence but also about the limits of free speech. In another discussion about the Second Amendment, Serber presented and students discussed recent work by a microsociologist about the situational nature of violence (Collins, 2008) in order to assess proposed solutions to gun violence.

Among the many powerful activities in our class was the first speaking assignment. Eberly intended it to show the importance of correct, credible information in making informed, sound judgments. Students, only a few of whom had heard that a fatal shooting had occurred on the Penn State campus several years earlier, were tasked with finding correct and reliable information about that shooting and sharing it with the class in a three-minute presentation. Duplicate sources were not given credit, meaning that students had the opportunity—and obligation—not only to cite sources but also to adjudicate competing claims at
After fifteen weeks talking about a variety of difficult subjects, students prepared to take their work outside the classroom. For their final writing project, they chose to draft recommendations for the commonwealth’s Task Force on School Violence (Wilson, 2013). Choosing to focus on four recurring topics (gun control, cultural influences, mental health, and school security), small groups of students researched statistics, case studies, comparative laws, histories, and current trends in order to draft executive summaries to send to the task force. As of the date of this publication, students had not yet found out where to send their information; the state task force meetings are not open to the public.

While next spring’s students may choose to take up where last spring’s left off, one final anecdote about the course deserves additional notice in the context of “obligations, opportunities, and objectives of civic and civil life.” One student, who consistently read difficult texts more closely and astutely than any other student in the class and whose comments and questions to his peers were always spot on, was not enthusiastic about the group project. The student, Brendan, said that he felt it was a waste of time to prepare materials for legislators who would likely never listen to what undergraduate students—or anyone who cannot afford to make large campaign donations—thought about gun control and public violence. While he participated in a group and engaged with his peers in research, he was unrelentingly negative about the chances of our class being able to gain the ear of any legislator. It was thus to our great surprise—and his classmates’ delight—that on the last day of class, as the group projects were handed in, he offered to share with us his rap called “No More Negative Nancy”:

Hey antiviolence commission
It’s time for you to listen
’Cause this class of ours
Is on a mission. (Brendan, 2013)

What it might have lacked in prosody, it made up for in rhetoric and rhetorical effect. Brendan managed to summarize the entire class’s group projects in a one-minute rap that clearly energized his very tired classmates:

So please let’s make the change.
Readjust the same old same.
Because no one’s listening to our generation,
We’re asking you
To help us
End this degradation. (BrenDanP, 2013)

Constitution Day Every Day: General Education as a Human Right

Just as observing and explicating the recurring topics of the Penn State shooting—or the University of Texas shooting, the Sandy Hook shooting, or any particular school shooting—helped students see topics common to all U.S. school shootings, any campus anywhere can provide the commonest—that is, most commonly shared, most public—topics around which to build general education curricula. When instructors and curricula ignore common campus spaces, campus histories, and campus controversies—our commonest topoi—students are denied precisely the synthesis of theory and practice, learning and habituation, that can help them together embody participatory democracy in a durable way. Furthermore, when we ignore the common—shared, public—rules by which we must conduct our campus, civic, and civil lives, we are less informed and less prepared to address those rules and laws when controversies do arise. Regardless of any scholar’s academic discipline, the laws and norms that constitute the nature and practice of civic and civil life affect us, one and all—in our private lives as well as in our public capacities as researchers, teachers, scholars, and citizens. Thus we end with the following transdisciplinary, transportable activity focused on constitutions, a means of constituting students’ democratic capacities not only in classrooms but also beyond, in wider publics.

Regardless of where you work and your students learn, chances are excellent that your campus has some kind of speech code. If you are an educator in the United States, does your campus require some kind of Constitution Day activity? Though the anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution has been commemorated, however obscurely, as “Citizenship Day” since the times of William Randolph Hearst, in 2001 Lynne Cheney announced plans for an annual commemoration of the U.S. Constitution denominated “Constitution Day” (“Constitution Day,” 2005). In 2004, West Virginia senator Robert C. Byrd introduced legislation mandating that all K–16 schools, colleges, and universities accepting any federal funds commemorate Constitution Day on or about September 17 of each year. Byrd’s bill, an amendment to an omnibus budget bill, was passed by Congress and signed into law by G. W. Bush in December 2004. In K–12 and higher education settings, this legislative mandate, unsurprisingly, has led to perfunctory epideictic pageants. Most colleges
and universities, like their K–12 counterparts, meet the mandate of Constitution Day by inviting a speaker to campus, holding a panel discussion, or sponsoring off-campus trips to historical sites.

In Eberly’s fall semester classes, no matter how early in the semester Constitution Day occurs, students decide together how they as a class will mark Constitution Day. Students in Eberly’s Literary Public Spheres course, for example, have read passages from banned and challenged books aloud in front of the Pattee and Paterno libraries or on the steps of Willard Building. Students in another section of the same course built cardboard-box shantytowns to raise the question of whether local student housing regulations are in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Students in Eberly’s Public Controversy class in fall semester 2009 performed the limitations of Penn State’s “Expressive Activities” code (Penn State—Administrative, 1999–2008) by making posters with particular passages from the code and placing those posters where their presence explicitly broke the code. For instance, part of policy AD51 specifies that signs cannot be affixed to the ground or to buildings, despite the fact that noncampus groups approved by the university routinely affix large signs bearing disturbing images to the ground, signs that are many times larger than what is specified in AD51. That fall’s students affixed signs bearing those regulations to the ground and to a major classroom building where a local preacher shouted misogynistic and homophobic “sermons” at students throughout the day—contrary to the specifications of AD51. Though the signs were removed by campus staff by midafternoon, thousands of students had seen the signs and, perhaps for the first time, learned, thanks to small flyers the students handed out, that student speech is restricted by AD51. The *Daily Collegian*, Penn State’s independent student newspaper, covered the students’ Constitution Day efforts, and many students who were not in the class joined in:

Reading banned books, holding signs outside the Hub-Robeson Center and duct-taping their mouths shut, students celebrated Constitution Day by expressing their right to free speech Thursday.

About 15 students from CAS 375 (Rhetoric and Public Controversy) sat alongside the Hub-Robeson Center main entrance, holding a long sign reading, “We’re not allowed to be expressive here.”

Kaila Gogal (senior-communication arts and sciences) said the main objective was to let students know where their rights stood on the Penn State campus.

“Under university policy, there’s Policy AD-51, which lists the restricted places students and others can openly express themselves,” Gogal said.
The policy lists certain places on campus where students can engage in “expressive activity,” including Old Main patio, the Allen Street Gates and the area between Willard Building and the Obelisk.

. . . During their . . . protest, the students gathered a lot of attention from those walking by.

“Hey, you’re breaking the rules!” one student yelled jokingly as he walked past.

Will Morgan (senior-psychology) felt the need to further express his rights by pouring water on a poster taped to the floor, stating a list of places students could openly express themselves on campus.

The act brought a round of applause from students nearby.

“I think it’s bullshit that there are [only] certain places that you can have freedom of speech,” Morgan said. “I think it’s even more ridiculous having to go through permits and all to form groups and speak your mind.”

Jason Traverse (senior-communication arts and sciences) said one of the reasons the class decided to sit in front of the Hub was in response to the traveling preachers that had raised controversy on campus in the past weeks.

“The university says . . . you can’t be expressive here, yet here are these preachers yelling [hate] at the top of their voices, and the school doesn’t do anything?” Traverse said. “They are breaking school rules and no one is doing something about it, so we’re here to bring awareness.” (Ramirez, 2009)

Judged from the stasis of proposal or the topos of sustainable efficacy, these students’ chosen collective Constitution Day activity likely has had little lasting effect on their institution of higher education. Yet, because they were given leave to choose it themselves from a list collaboratively generated and researched, this activity and others like it offer students not only a clear sense of their own agency but also a clear example of the habits, opportunities, and obligations of shared, public life. Among the most troubling “civic engagement” or “democratic deliberation” initiatives are those that assign or mandate specific, pre-chosen activities. Such programs can lead to a “once and done” view of civic responsibility (just as “W” courses can lead to a view that writing or speaking or communication “problems” can be “solved” in one course—or two or four). What transportable skills of collaborative education and democratic will-formation are learned when students and other citizens are assigned to be engaged in activities that they have not had a voice in inventing, deliberating, and choosing, together, by themselves? Reading and researching the U.S. Constitution can, for student ears
ever further removed from the cadences and conventions of eighteenth-century prose, be a potentially dull exercise. Yet connecting that prose to contemporary problems that affect them, their friends, and their families—Dewey (1927) defined a public as those who share not only the direct but also the indirect consequences of a problem—can bring that Constitution and other constitutions alive for students who seek better to understand their individual and collective rights and responsibilities.

Furthermore, viewed from a non-U.S. perspective—or even from a perspective beyond a relatively privileged U.S. campus with the second-highest tuition of any public university in the nation—speech codes and literary obscenity, banned or not, hardly rank as wicked problems of the first rank, locally or globally. Yet letting students decide together—for themselves—how they will exercise rights given to them by the U.S. Constitution—rights freshly discovered—can help students otherwise regarded as spectators or consumers learn, in the words of Adrienne Rich (1977/1979), how to claim their education and constitute themselves as a public.

Not everywhere are students so privileged as to be able to claim an education already offered. Not everywhere is an education offered. Not everywhere is education allowed. And not everywhere is education a human right. After students study the U.S. Constitution, they read the constitution of a country of their choosing. The South African Constitution has been of interest to students who know that the country is a relatively new democracy. Reading the even more recent Iraqi Constitution, students have been surprised to learn that “free education is a right for all Iraqis in all its stages” (Article 3). While we have not yet had the opportunity to share with students the July 2013 speech by Malala Yousafzai at the United Nations, we offer Yousafzai the final word here on the fundamental necessity of the right to life, to liberty, and—not to property and not to happiness—to education:

Dear sisters and brothers, we realize the importance of light when we see darkness. We realize the importance of our voice when we are silenced. In the same way, when we were in Swat, the north of Pakistan, we realized the importance of pens and books when we saw the guns. The wise saying, “The pen is mightier than the sword”: It is true. The extremists are afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women. The power of the voice of women frightens them. This is why they killed fourteen innocent students in the recent attack in Quetta. And that is why they kill female teachers. That is why they are blasting schools every day because they were and they are afraid of change and equality that we will bring to our
society. And I remember that there was a boy in our school who was asked by a journalist, Why are the Taliban against education? He answered very simply by pointing to his book. He said, “A Talib doesn’t know what is written inside this book.”

Appendix: Syllabus Excerpt

CAS 478: Contemporary American Political Rhetoric—School Shootings and Rhetorics of Public Memory

Prof. Rosa A. Eberly, Associate Professor of Rhetoric
Mr. Brad Serber, Graduate Assistant (not TA!)

Course Description

This course provides you the opportunity to use the study and practice of rhetoric for the public good in the context of a vexing public problem: school shootings. Informed by the rich history of rhetorical theory in general and argumentation and public memory studies in particular, this course offers readings and texts from media other than print as points of departure to enable this unique group of students at this unique moment in time to learn and deliberate together about the causes, consequences, and possible remedies for school shootings. Students will do this by studying discourses about those events and by producing their own discourses by using rhetoric as a means of what Janet Atwill has called “invention and intervention.”

Required Texts

Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone* (Purchase online)
Erin’s proposal from *RHE 330E* at UTx (Angel)
Tower class memorial Web site at UTx (Angel)
Eberly op-eds about Tower (Angel)
Collegian digital archive, http://digitalnewspapers.libraries.psu.edu/
Bradley A. Serber, “We Already Talk About Kevin; We Need to Talk About Eva and Lacy: Reconstituting Victimhood and Memory Through Fictional School Shootings,” manuscript
Craig Rood, manuscript on presidential response to school shootings
Other texts as listed on the course schedule and/or assigned in class

Select News and Public Affairs Resources

Thomas—Congressional Record online, http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php
White House speech archive, http://www.whitehouse.gov
Collegian digital archive, library database, http://digitalnewspapers.libraries.psu.edu/
Voices of Central Pa, print and Web, http://www.voicesweb.org
WPSU-FM, broadcast, 91.5FM
C-SPAN, broadcast and Web, http://www.c-span.org
The Lion, broadcast and Web, http://www.thelion.fm/

Major Assignments

THREE SPEAKING ASSIGNMENTS
S1. Research assignment on news coverage of Penn State shooting
Post news stories on Angel and lead discussion in class—no duplication (3 minutes) (10% of grade)

S2. Collaborative presentation of one RPA forum article to the class (15 minutes plus 10 minutes Q&A) (10% of grade)

S3. Class-wide group project—class deliberates and decides on project after spring break (10% of grade)
THREE SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
W1. Oral history/personal account of cultural violence/public memory—stasis of fact/conjecture
(3–4 pages) (10% of grade)

W2. Rhetorical analysis of cultural artifact—speech, film, video game, image, etc.—stases of definition, evaluation
(3–4 pages) (10% of grade)

W3. Commentary on school shootings, rhetoric, and public memory—any stasis or stases combination
(3–4 pages) (20% of grade)

ONE AUDIO ASSIGNMENT
A1. Commentary delivered in audio and published on the Web (may be password protected if you prefer)
(10% of grade)

Class participation, active listening, Angel postings, collaborative research, “for the good of the order”
(10% of grade)

Key Concepts

topoi, topoi maps, stases and their place in productive deliberation
forensic, epideictic, deliberative rhetorics and their places and paths
canons: for students’ productive capacities and as grounds for public memory
öffentlichkeit: public, publicity, publicness, koine, common
public memory, memory studies
rhetoric’s central place in democratic capacity-building
protopublic classroom
collaboration

Desired Competencies/Pedagogical Goals

Democratic capacity through rhetorical theory and practice
Public scholarship: academic research addressing a vexing public problem
Course Policies

Your face and voice and careful attention are required in class each day for several reasons, not the least of which is that you need to attend and participate to help determine what the class will be and what we will do.

Full attendance is vital to the success of this course. Further, given the values of citizenship rather than spectatorship on which this course operates, steadfast attention and commitment to a group enterprise are part of what you will practice together this semester. More than four absences for any reason will affect your grade negatively; after three absences, each additional absence will lower your final letter grade by 5 percent (of the total grade possible, i.e., of 100). If you must miss class, be sure to contact someone from the class to find out what you missed and what might have changed; also check for notes on Angel. Posting your class notes and/or reading notes on Angel after each class meeting is a good way to build the habit of active citizenship in this class.

I will announce any changes to the course schedule in class before they happen, but you will be responsible for taking note of changes and updating the syllabus. Make sure you always have contact information for at least two others in the class starting today: e-mail addresses and/or phone numbers will allow you to get in touch with someone else if you absolutely must miss a class meeting. Remember: everyone’s e-mail address is on our Angel site.

You will sign up in advance for presentation dates for assignments S1 and S2; missing your scheduled date will lower your grade by one full letter grade. When a writing assignment is due, hand it in, printed, in class. Any assignments handed in after the due date will lose one full letter grade for each calendar day the assignment is late. Sorry for the specificity, but I’ve learned over 20 years of teaching at large, public universities that it is better to be specific and to have high standards or students are likely not to read, not to attend class, and not to learn. I expect great things of you.

Be prepared to read out loud and discuss a favorite or challenging or remarkable passage from each text we read. What did you learn? What surprised you? Do this every class meeting, even when I don’t have “Bring passages” listed in the syllabus. You will want to mark passages in your books—in pencil (or with Post-its if you like) and an annotation tool for pdfs—and take detailed notes about the readings. You will also want to take notes on our class discussions, though you might not always know why you’re taking notes. It’s a good habit, taking notes. Always bring to class the text that has been assigned for that day, even if (in the case of pdfs on Angel) it is just your reading notes and passages. Take notes about passages that others mention, including page number.
Laptops/tablets are allowed for course readings, but they must not impede your attention to class discussion. If they do negatively affect your listening and participation, you will be told to keep your laptop or tablet away for the rest of the semester, to print readings to bring to class, and to take notes on paper. This class, more than most others, demands your full attention, and you need to learn how to have a laptop or tablet in front of you while maintaining eye contact and close listening.

Do not hesitate to e-mail me if you have questions about course assignments; even better, ask questions in class so that others may benefit from your questions. Come to my office hours at least once during the semester; making an appointment is the best way to find me in. I am not always able to answer every e-mail I receive, but I do my best.

Criteria for Grading Writing

This is not a “W” course, so I will not be intervening in your writing process by commenting on topic proposals or rough drafts. You will, however, need to invent and compose topic proposals, post topic proposals on Angel, bring rough drafts to class, conduct peer-review workshops with your classmates, and edit and proofread your final drafts. The general criteria I’ll use in this course to evaluate all your written assignments include: Does the final draft fulfill the assignment? Does the writer make a clear argument and support it with reasons generated both by the writer (intrinsic ethos) and by sources external to the writer (extrinsic ethos)? Does the final draft have a coherent and reasoned organization? Could a typical reader in the writer’s intended audience understand, follow the reasoning of, find the external sources mentioned in, and respond to the writer’s argument? Are there more than two errors or misspellings or typos per page? If so, you are not presenting yourself credibly, and your grade will suffer. There will also be criteria specific to each writing assignment in terms of audience, exigence, purpose, and citation style. Public discourse differs from academic discourse in many ways; one of the most obvious is that public discourse very, very rarely if ever includes parenthetical citations or footnotes like those you have used in MLA or APA style. We’ll discuss ways of citing sources in public discourse so that readers can find, verify, and possibly question and respond to your sources, as well as to your own arguments and analyses.

You’ll be wise to learn to rely on your classmates to read and respond to your topic proposals and drafts, another habit of collaborative democracy.
Read the “How to Avoid Plagiarism” handout on Angel. Finally, I have provided you links to the Undergraduate Writing Center below. Consider yourself informed.

**NOTE**
Brad Serber would like to thank Rosa Eberly and Jeremy Cohen for their help with this article.

**Works Cited**


