

# ‘KEEP YOUR KEYS’: TEACHING, DEMOCRACY, AND PERFORMANCE ART

by Stephen Gencarella Olbrys



**E**va Despres was the best educator I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. Like all good teachers, she treated the classroom and “real life” as inseparable. And she knew the importance of a good trick. She once assigned a series of vocabulary quizzes. The first time we were responsible for 10 words. The next week we faced 20. Then 25. Then 30. And the complaints began under our breaths. Then 35. Then 40. And so on to what seemed a Herculean task at the time.

Finally a few of us summoned the fortitude to challenge her authority and petition for reasonableness. Her face, always framed by round glasses perched upon her cheeks, broke into a devious smile. The lesson’s aim, she explained, was not the vocabulary, but rather learning to speak up for the community and to take command of our own education. While many classmates grumbled with aggravation, her trickster’s act shook my intellectual foundation and inspired me to learn the art of teaching.

I tell this story when I lecture on the role of education in a healthy democracy. When I teach, I tell students narratives and invite the same.

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And I play tricks when I am ethically free to do so. For I learned from Ms. Despres that teaching is best appreciated as a kind of performance art. All educators inherit the legacy of a performance tradition with the possibility to awaken students from dogmatism, fundamentalism, and elitism. Therein lies its democratic opportunities.

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This essay offers an examination of how we might incorporate democratic performances into our teaching—and thus embrace the realm of rhetoric, aesthetic displays, emotions, and opinions—and encourage our students’ emergence as active citizens.

The word “democracy” is an essentially contested concept that means different things for different people, so it is important to detail its use herein.<sup>1</sup> I conceptualize democracy as neither exclusively a governmental system of representation nor a set of guaranteed rights such as voting. Instead, it is a way of living and a way of communicating

with others, with two correlates. First, democracy requires a *respect* for the delicate balance between individual autonomy and civic community. Second, democracy warrants a *distrust* of centralized authority and long-standing power. This distrust does not mean anarchy. It means making public judgments about what authority to legitimize. It means coming to terms with the limitless abuses of unlimited power and taking pains to prevent it. Democracy does not belong to a particular group. It is the ground between groups and is tested by their interactions. If we seek to foster a democratic attitude within our students, we need to find ways to inspire that mutual respect and healthy distrust within our classrooms.

I lament that too often we educators—and I indict myself first—equate democracy with our version of it, our own political ideology or party agenda. It is tempting to assume we hold a correct worldview. But such an assumption also lies at the root of intolerance and injustice we so often struggle against. An alternative perspective to an ownership model considers democracy as a way of getting along despite our differing opinions or what the rhetorical critic Kenneth Burke once called “sparring without parting.” We need to offer students this opportunity for sparring and argue that an education is incomplete without it.

I have the good fortune of regularly teaching a lecture class called Democracy and Discourse at the University of Massachusetts. The course was listed in the course catalog when I arrived on campus but had never

been taught.

From the first day of the first class I was struck by the students' mixture of political commitments. We were a group of left-wingers, neoconservatives, libertarians, anarchists, Democrats, Republicans, Greens, and a sizeable majority of the disheartened, the disenfranchised, and the disinterested. Over the semester we became a community several hundred strong precisely because we learned to spar with one another's politics and ideas. In between lectures on Habermas and Mouffe, ideographs, protest songs, Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs), and new telecommunications, students raised their voices, sometimes in very heated argument, and occasionally even brought in reinforcements of the like-minded who were not enrolled in the course. It was, as the saying goes, quite an education for all of us.

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Today, I wish a class like this—part lecture, part civics lesson, part large open debate—were incor-

porated into the curriculum of every student as a lived introduction to public discourse and civic participation. I say this in praise of the students who so impressed me and who, according to the evaluations, found in this course an appreciation for democratic sparring as something far more rich than the barking of talking heads that dominates so-called debates in much mainstream media. For those who unabashedly conjoin a healthy democratic society with a healthy educational system, then, it is imperative to find ways for students to learn how to perform democracy, because democracy requires practice.

John Dewey and Paolo Freire rightly come to mind in considering the intimate connections between education, democracy, performance, and citizenship, but I wish to explore the contributions of another significant figure: Isocrates, Plato's chief rival in classical Athens. Although Isocrates often plays a small role in canonical readings of Western civilization—usually taking a footnote as an Attic orator—in its day his school far overshadowed Plato's Academy precisely because it promised an education in citizenship and public address rather than contemplation and abstract theory. To reclaim Isocrates from the eclipse of Plato (a phenomenon wrought by later philosophers) is an important step in rounding out a classical and humanistic education. But there is more at stake here than one might imagine. For while Plato was certainly a lover of wisdom, he was not a lover of democracy. When we base our pedagogy in Platonic

methods we follow a time-honored tradition that envisions education as the pursuit of truth, but in so doing we may overlook other approaches that are decidedly more democratic.

Interest in Isocratean education has grown steadily since the 1960s and recently enjoyed a sharp rise.<sup>2</sup> His is an apt model for educators to consider (and update) because it mediates the polarities of the freewheeling sophists and Platonic rationalists. Unlike the sophists, Isocrates was not an itinerant teacher but fully dedicated as a citizen to the life of the Athenian polity. Unlike the rationalists, he was concerned with practical political matters—transforming individual students into active citizens.

**I**socrates recognized the dangers for manipulation by demagogues in a democratic society, as did Plato, but his solution was not to discipline rhetoric or commend the life of contemplation at the expense of the contingent. Rather, he sought to impart in his students a sense of ethical responsibility and desire for identification with others. He brought this motivation to all whom he advised, whether they were Athenian citizens or foreign oligarchs. Isocrates asks his students to learn the political art of good judgment and the performance skills, such as oratory and argument, necessary for timely deliberations concerning the best course of action for the community. In this manner, he argues, they would learn to transform their private passions into a personal good will toward other individuals and ultimately make the leap into a sense of unity with other citizens of differing passions through practice of this political discourse.



What Isocrates proposes is a very delicate balancing act between the individual and the community, desires and ethics, personal and public judgments—what Hannah Arendt would later distinguish as acting for one’s conscience and acting for the world. His notion of identification, predicated on the recognition of differing opinions, has a remarkably contemporary feel to it. Too little a sense of identification and the world collapses into a contest of individualism. Too much for too long and the risk of fascism arises. Healthy democracy perches on the razor’s edge. And this is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to guide our students toward democratic behavior. We cannot simply instruct them about democracy as if it were a bullet point lurking on an overhead. They must learn to balance these sometimes tumultuous and protean demands. We impoverish our students if we fail to provide opportunities to practice the art of democracy within the safe arena of the classroom.

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To do so is to walk on infirm ground, however, because it means we must place a primary emphasis upon opinions, desires, aesthetic pleasures, and even disobedience within the academy, which has been cemented on a pursuit of knowledge that too often dismisses opinions and desires and pleasures and disobedience as insignificant. This is the legacy of Platonic—and Enlightenment—educational elitism: the privileging of knowledge (sometimes as information and sometimes as a presumed Truth) over other human experience coupled with a promotion of the disembodied and invulnerable mind. To reconsider and adapt an Isocratean model of education is to usher a more humane course of action that *shows* students why democratic practice matters rather than simply instructs them on the point.

It couldn’t be more timely. In an age of massive funding cuts and rising costs of education across the nation, increased academic corporatization, and potentially depressed morale among faculty and students, *what people think and what people want their world to be* are legitimate, pressing political questions. Rather than decry how little students care about the political process, then, we should take this moment as a timely invitation to create opportunities for public discussion and perform citizenship. To do this is to promote more performances of rhetoric in the classroom.

I hear the concerned voices rising as I write that line. *More* rhetoric? But isn’t that what’s wrong with the world today—too much rhetoric,

too many sound bites, too much infotainment, too many spin acts? Shouldn't we promote substance over style? Shouldn't we pursue truth over triviality, especially in academia? Isn't a good education founded on weeding out opinions and replacing them with knowledge and values that stand the test of time? Isn't rhetoric the ideological veneer that covers reality and that disappears when one sees the light?

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To these legitimate questions, I respond that while the physical world is "real" in that there exists tangible forms and determinable scientific laws, the social world is a construct of our interactions. The world we live in is one we have made through our rhetoric. Whether it becomes more equitable and just and democratic is up to us. Those who appreciate how discourse creates our world need to do more than identify this sociolinguistic phenomenon; we must show its consequences to students and perform it. Only then will

the sometimes troubling idea of social construction resonate and encourage aspirations to participate in nourishing democratic discourse.

Making students aware of rhetoric's power requires more than admonishing them for being bamboozled by all the surrounding political and consumerist forces. Too often this pedagogical model merely replaces one ideology posing as an absolute truth for another. Entrenched academics on all points of the political spectrum may lecture with the sincere hope that what they profess will make the world better, but this approach nevertheless can lead to an education that is stillborn if students do not find the inspiration to trust their own voices, practice the arts of judgment, disagree with others, and even distrust authority—including their professors—in the name of democratic sparring. All of these are acts of rhetoric.

If we conceptualize academia as a place to eradicate rhetoric rather than to practice it with guidance, we forget schools serve as safe mediating structures between private and public life.<sup>3</sup> Like all citizens, students need to know in an active way that their voices matter beyond voting clichés. We need to let them perform democracy so they can form political commitments, test them, struggle with their expression in public, and recognize others doing the same. And it is unfair to demand they come to us aware of the necessity and enjoyment of civic participation. As Benjamin Barber aptly asserts:

[T]he young are born neither wise, nor literate, nor responsible—nor,

despite the great rhetoric to the contrary, are they born free. They are born at best with the potential for wisdom, literacy, and responsibility, with an aptitude for freedom which is, however, matched by an aptitude for security and thus for tyranny.<sup>4</sup>

A democratic educator's role lies in advancing opportunities for the potential of freedom. This cannot be accomplished if educators refuse challenges to their authority or lament how self-absorbed students are without performing ways to change it.

This is where a broadly Isocratean pedagogy helps stir the mix. Isocrates is savvy about raw human nature. He readily admits that it is no easy task to impart a civic attitude since "everyone does everything for pleasure, profit, or honor" (*Antidosis* 217)—that is, self-interest is the most powerful human motive. It is also the starting point for any education that will take hold and transform students into citizens. For

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Isocrates, it doesn't make sense to deny people their interests, opinions, desires, and vices. It is more prudent for educators to recognize and build upon them toward an idea of community that coexists and complements the individual. Pitting one against the other simply frustrates people and usually collapses into a valorization of the individual. But starting with the notion of self-interest does not necessarily culminate in the fetish of privatization.

This recognition of self-interest occupies Isocrates' central pedagogical concern of how educators may please and advise at the same time. He realizes it is a rare occasion when an educator can simply advise a willing audience. Instead, one has to give people what they want, and what most want are pleasing rhetorical performances. The question of the packaging and the delivery of the advice has an impact on its reception. In Isocrates' view a successful education must make two gestures. First, it learns from the poets and artists. Unlike Plato, who in *The Republic* disciplines the arts to serve a rigid education for the state and its unchanging values, Isocrates celebrates the potential of artistry—rhetoric in motion—to delight people of diverse opinions and encourage them to practice civic unity while still developing a critical faculty that prevents what we would recognize today as *totalitarian* unity.

Certainly Isocrates' pedagogy is far more risky than Plato's because it does not stand on guaranteed morality and absolute knowledge. It runs

the risk of collapse into demagoguery. But this is also why if done well it better accommodates democracy and discourages intellectual elitism. An Isocratean approach recognizes that power, although dangerous, can be used for ethically sound means such as public deliberation. This brings us to the second gesture. Since the constitution of ethical behavior changes over time and from situation to situation, teaching universals won't work. It is better, then, to educate in a manner that invites students

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to recognize the continual tension between politics and ethics and to struggle with making judgments responsible to both self-interest and the community's needs. This is a form of cultivated distrust of authority because it means no political act is ever without question.

An educator accomplishes this lesson by providing examples for performance and context-specific lived experience to her or his students. Isocrates offered his own examples in writing works that highlighted the memorable deeds of historical figures

as models for acting in a given society. He wrote several letters, for example, to the oligarch Nicocles in which he praised the sovereign's father Evagoras as a leader who earned fame and honor through tolerance toward his subjects. In so doing Isocrates revealed a path for Nicocles that would, in effect, bring him honor, political success, and a connection with his admired father, and would bring his people a more just society.

If we wish to translate an Isocratean pedagogy for contemporary American education, we need to foster embodied and inspiring democratic rhetoric. And we have to start by finding ways of performing democracy in the classroom from the smallest seminar to the largest lecture. There is no secret to advancing democratic education. It begins when the teacher treats students as equal fellow citizens and creates a classroom or lecture hall that is a micro-version of the democratic experiment. Isocrates understood the importance of gaining audience commitment. He told stories and prepared his students for participation in public life, but more importantly he found pleasing ways to demonstrate what he advised people to do because he recognized that as an educator his actions were a model for his students. We need to achieve the same.

The disconnect many students have with educators comes when we tell them to care about something in the social world but provide no examples of what that care looks like or offer no opportunities for them

to practice caring. This is an irony haunting education. But if we are not humane and understanding with our students we cannot possibly expect them to become humane and understanding citizens. If we do not provide democracy in the classroom, we ensure our students will not seek it outside. How we act toward them as political beings resonates with how they act toward other political beings. And when we invoke democracy or citizenship or justice or tolerance, we become the model for it. This is why it is so important to treat students as apprentices in citizenship. We have to show them what a citizen is when they turn their gaze upon us, and this requires that we sympathize with them. In some very substantial ways, students socializing at bars are being more democratic than the cloistered academic. Finding ways to speak of a shared community and common vices and vulnerabilities rather than demanding perfection is an important enactment of democratic bonding.

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This commitment warrants that we advance democratic ways of interacting rather than simply reproduce our ideological claims—that we seek a dialogue of influences and struggles over opinions and tastes, not a discipleship. Put simply, we need to encourage students to a healthy distrust of centralized authority starting with ourselves. The fostering of an educated citizen is a very different process than the kind of academic reproduction that is often the hallmark of research institutions. But if we are serious about democracy we need to embrace its fundamental decentralization of power. In practical terms this means we have to find ways to invite students to speak their opinions and critique *our* authority so they gain experience and learn the nontotalitarian life.

This doesn't mean allowing any opinion to fly or that we tolerate poorly reasoned, injudicious, or oppressive expressions of belief. Dogmatists who are critical of relativism usually portray it as a bacchanalian celebration of any-opinion-goes and consequently dismiss any opinion that differs from what they take as knowledge, authority, or truth. The approach I am advocating here is not extremist or shallow relativism precisely because it demands the students learn and practice ways to become responsible for their expression of opinions to a community of equals who will make judgments and respond to the rhetoric with other rhetoric. This approach asks for respect but not obedience to order. Hence it means inviting even troubling utterances and asking every class partici-

pant to engage them rather than asserting professorial authority as the most legitimate response. This invitational approach potentially will lead to a little less structure and a slowing down of the lesson plan, but it dramatizes the benefits of democracy's *inefficiency*, a "colossal getting in one's own way" as Burke once phrased it.<sup>5</sup>

A democratic performance approach to a class will also occasionally bother those students who seek token straight As; that is, the rule-

oriented student who simply wants to reproduce the method given through instruction to please the teacher and get the grade that ultimately serves the banal symbolic purpose of having high grades (a kind of elitism) rather than engaging the world through education.

On numerous occasions, top-ranking students have confronted me for not providing enough instruction about my expectations or allowing digressions that keep us from the assigned lecture topic or

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permitting the class to alter the contractual obligations of the syllabus. I explain to them that it is not my job to tell people what to do or think but rather to help them enter into critical dialogue once they take control of their own education, which is not necessarily the equivalent of getting high grades. And I make it clear that a non-hierarchical approach enlivens many students who have come to believe their voices do not matter or that they are not as smart as the smart kids and therefore should remain silent. For students who have grown used to praise in exchange for obedience this approach is a hard lesson because it robs them of their security. But such robbery may be an act of freedom. It may open a productive wound and de-tyrannize education, and often it makes students truly work in a committed way for the first time—so long as the teacher does not abandon them in the creation of a community of equals.

How, then, might we foster democratic performances in a classroom or a lecture hall? For the remainder of this essay I present several options that have worked for me. I offer them not as a definitive nor authoritative list but as an invitation to sparring.

First, we need to always further humanize the classroom experience. This not only means the basics like learning student names quickly, but also showing vulnerabilities: admitting when we just don't know something, inviting criticism, or letting students know where we're coming

from politically without expecting them to think the same.<sup>6</sup> Timely and decorous narratives help tremendously to reveal motivations, contextualize commentary, and provoke responses that are sharp but not hostile.

Second, we need to encourage opinions as a complement to knowledge when *pedagogical circumstances allow*. I'm not calling for a "Creationism Day" in a class on evolution; some courses by their very constitution simply will not have the appropriate opportunities for such debate. But involvement through opinion can come in other ways. We can encourage students to become critical of every word they hear, starting with our own. By calling overt attention to the authority structures of the class we can invite innovative responses and antagonisms that may lead to remarkably creative work.

Third, we can break expected teaching frames and improvise. Performances encourage further performances. The chemistry professor who hands out information on voter registration and a brief explanation of upcoming referenda may

just shock student expectations in a way that a political science teacher cannot. Improvised teaching rather than meticulously planned classroom control may allow for student involvement that patterns the kind of mutual respect underlying a healthy democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, we can provide substantial opportunities for students to decide the fate of the class. Let us consider an infamous example: the dreaded circle-of-chairs rearrangement can become an empty signifier—just one more chore to pretend there's been a significant shift in power—if it is not accompanied by a democratic attitude. When colleagues tell me they favor the circle because it empowers students, I always ask them if they asked the students what room arrangement they want and explain how power is grafted onto architecture. A similar issue arises over the automatic celebration of small groups, which if merely assigned to the unwilling can be just as authoritarian as many presume the standard desk arrangement to be. In other words, it's not just what we do with the classroom but *how* we do it. Inviting students to decide how many multiple choice and how many true and false questions may seem like a democratic gesture, but having them argue why an exam is unnecessary and sticking to the community's judgment may gain incredible results whose lesson extends far beyond the classroom. Performances stay with us while specific information often fades, so it behooves educators to continuously

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play with traditional expressions of academic authority or their equally exhausted presumed improvements.

All of this may seem to suggest another indictment against the traditional lecture. It is not. A brilliant lecture is a performance that may move students toward significant re-conceptualizations of their world.<sup>8</sup> It may create a spark that links personal experience and public culture, especially if it shakes students out of consumer complacency. The question of one's lecture *style* is important, however, because style and politics are closely related.<sup>9</sup> The lecturer who holds

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court—who speaks at students, ducks response, and stands immobile at the podium—communicates something very different about democratic participation than a lecturer who speaks with students, invites response, and rematerializes the body. I am not asserting that one style is inherently better than the other. I've tried both and have enjoyed and hated both. But self-awareness and revelation to students of this construct of authority is a

potential gold mine for encouraging the democratic gesture of distrusting us just enough.

Fostered democratic distrust opens doors. When educators welcome students to look critically at their teaching performances and respond to their classmates' rhetoric, the students may soon do so with other authorities. To promote the revolutionary idea that to be democratic is to understand the necessity of yielding power for the sake of others invigorates students to demand it. This does not signal the end of knowledge nor the end of ethics. It is, however, an appreciation of opinions and raised voices as the basis of democracy. If we educators are sincere about democracy, we need to foster a little more disobedience. If we believe that the future lies in our youth, we had best equip them to handle it. And if we recognize that a good education is a troubling thing, we need to make some trouble for the rule makers, including ourselves.

I close with another anecdote about Ms. Despres. Long before I was her student, she was the victim of a considerable injustice. Every morning she would come to school hours before the other teachers, the administrators, and the secretaries. It was a time when school employees were allowed their own set of building keys. Ms. Despres would arrive diligently just after dawn, let herself into the school library, and enjoy a quiet moment reading or preparing herself for the day's demands. For some

mysterious bureaucratic reason, the principal eventually decided that the teachers could not be trusted with their own keys. When his actions verifiably robbed her of a simple pleasure, Ms. Despres protested, but to no avail. The policy had changed, she was instructed, and no one was above the policy's authority. As she yielded her set, she responded in a determined voice we students knew quite well. "Keep your keys," she declared defiantly, "I have your children."

Ms. Despres was right. She had us. And under her care we learned that the democratic experience, the give-and-take that is the heart of meaningful education and humane negotiations of power, bears the potential to withstand any act of vain authority designed to discipline it simply for the sake of discipline. 

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See W.B. Gallie, *Philosophy and Historical Understanding*.
- <sup>2</sup> Isocrates' influence on education held strong until the Enlightenment. Werner Jaeger, 1971 (originally 1944), provides a key analysis. See Takis Poulakos, 1997, for a recent account.
- <sup>3</sup> See Jay Mechling, "Meditating Structures."
- <sup>4</sup> Benjamin Barber, *A Passion for Democracy*, 182.
- <sup>5</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Counter Statement*, 114. Burke contrasts democracy against fascism's emphasis on efficiency.
- <sup>6</sup> I do not want to ignore questions of gender and race that enter any discussion of classroom conduct. See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, for important considerations.
- <sup>7</sup> See Jacquelyn Baker-Sennett and Eugene Matusov, "School Performance."
- <sup>8</sup> See Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk*.
- <sup>9</sup> See Robert Hariman, *Political Style*.

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