

# Rhetorical Education for Public Responsibility

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Two of my intellectual children will turn 40 in the year 2008, the ICC and the IRM. It is therefore a good opportunity, here in Maine at a colloquium of the ICC, to speak about the IRM and its goals, and to consider whether and how the two organizations might be related.

The ICC is the “International Colloquium for Communication,” which — after several preliminary negotiations — was convened for the first time in Heidelberg in the summer of 1968. Since that time people in communication from Europe and the United States, specialists in both theory and pedagogy, have met every two years, now on this side of the “big pond,” now on that side.

The IRM is the “Institute for Rhetoric and Methodology in Political Education,” which began its work in October 1968 at the European Academy in Otzenhausen (EAO) in the Saarland. Since then some thousand people have participated in extra-curricular adult-education seminars at the Institute.

As president of the DGSS [German Society for Speech and Speech Education] at the time, my idea for the foundation of both organizations was, at first glance, professional and professional-political. In both cases, however, closer examination reveals that the motivation comes from a theory of democracy. (Both organizations were possible only in the Western-oriented, democratically constituted Federal Republic of Germany; the GDR (German Democratic Republic) on the other hand, was occupied by the Soviets until 1989 and was ruled during that time by a single state party, therefore it was a democracy in name only.)<sup>1</sup>

The ICC was the first “international” establishment with which the decidedly and emphatically “German” disciplines “Sprechkunde” (fields of speech) and “Sprecherziehung” (speech education) freed themselves from their narrow, nationalistic traditions after WWII. This was especially important for a field whose basic concepts during the racist Nazi years were biological, and whose great success in supporting Nazi ideology was

to train teachers based on essentialist notions of the “mother tongue.” Small wonder that the field all but disappeared from the universities after the end of the war. In America, on the other hand, the profession had been established on democratic principles since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was able to develop steadily, with the right to grant doctorates and to function as an independent discipline. The large number of publications, monographs and periodicals since 1910 attest to this independence and development.<sup>2</sup> If the discipline was to have a chance in Germany, then it was high time to look at last beyond one’s own nose, to a place where the discipline had established itself in a democratic context, both at the college level and in school systems.

An early milestone in the (at first only spiritual) international cooperation was the publication of a collection in which the editor, Wilbur Schramm (1963)<sup>3</sup>, reported on the findings of such researchers as Lazarsfeld, Levin, Lasswell, and Hovland: Festinger wrote about the doctrine of “cognitive dissonance”; Osgood on the “meaning of meaning;” and Maccoby on the “new scientific rhetoric.” Moreover, there were other important contributions in this book, for example about mass communication, voter behavior, the effects of television, and programmed instruction. Both professionally and politically this was all *terra incognita* for the people in Germany who were thinking about communication, in a country where democracy still stood on “shaky legs.”

In October 1965 many of these ideas were echoed in a question-and-answer session (that I led and) that was broadcast by Radio Saarland (another innovation!) on the occasion of the first convention of the DGSS. “Communicating — Talking to Each Other in Community.” Colored by the awareness of Germany’s undemocratic history, the conversation ran to some of the contemporary transformations in the language, to the difference between communicating and understanding in everyday life and in international politics. It was not about techniques but about a particular social attitude as

the prerequisite for democratization, about the resistance that was being encountered on this path and the extent to which the resistance might be overcome by rhetoric, as a general approach to life, maybe not by all citizens, but by “opinion leaders.” One person asked the panel: “Has any thought been given to how you might reach these people (that is the opinion leaders) in order to influence larger groups through them?” A guest, Fred Casmir (of the Speech Communication Association), described developments in universities and schools in the US, all under the motto, “Keep the channel of communication open.” Someone asked whether this was not a particularly important task for adult education. Where should people learn how to handle conflict, for that is an essential trait of democracy. This led to the (my) closing words: “Talking to each other honestly, the courage for conflict, for thinking controversially, for listening to different opinions is a way in which truth can be found. Of course this will require people to reflect, listen and talk to each other.” (4, 117)<sup>4</sup>

Basically this already amounted to a curriculum for an adult education course democratic rhetoric. But it took another three years and some preliminary negotiations — by Fred Casmir for the SCA, by me for the DGSS — before the ICC and – independently - the IRM were founded in 1968, the two organizations whose goals and work I would now like to report on.

Because the schools in Germany were not generally preparing young people for democratic behavior by providing them with training in rhetorical skills, and as a result many adults remained without this background, an institution was necessary in which adults could learn what the schools had denied them. Of course this could not be accomplished for the graduates of all the schools in the country, rather this remedial work made sense only for opinion leaders (“multipliers”). No polytechnic, no university was equipped for the task. But still, this “basic democratic” concept could only be realized within an active organization that had no ideological bias of its own, as would be the case with organizations sponsored by churches or political parties. I found what I was looking for at the European Academy at Otzenhausen. After various discussions with the academy’s directors and giving some seminars there, I was sure this was the place. It was there that the Institute for Rhetoric and Methodology in Political Education, the IRM, took up its work in November 1968.

The current director of the European Academy, Eva Wessela, wrote the following in 2004 on the occasion of the Academy’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary: “The basis of the institution’s work is Hellmut Geissner’s conception of ‘rhetorical communication,’” which is laid out in the first programmatic publication, “Goals and Methodological Foundations of the Institute for Rhetoric and Methodology in the Political Education” (1968)

*1. Political action requires a capacity for judgment. The capacity for judgment requires information. Information is available only through communication. Informed Communication is education. The capacity to judge exists in a process of continuous education.*

*2. “Rhetorical communication” is the leading element in this process because “talking to each other” is fundamental among the opportunities for social interaction. Talking and answering back, this keeps the channel of communication open in both directions, because there is freedom on both sides. It reduces the risk of indoctrination, opens possibilities for rationality, and forms the basis for common action.*

*3. The term “rhetorical communication” encompasses in its broader sense all attempts to inform, to structure knowledge, to form opinions, to change attitudes, to spur people to action. The basis of and model for communication—whether verbal or nonverbal, optical or acoustic, direct or indirect—is always, strictly speaking, rhetorical.*

*4. Therefore communicators, political trainers, advisors, conference directors, politicians, leaders of all kinds—should recognize their function in this communication process and acquire new methods for their work. This goal, together with the previous knowledge and experiences of the participants, determines the program, which is divided into foundation courses and continuing courses: Basics of the Communication Process (Role Theory, Field and Situation Analysis, Group Dynamics); Forms of Rhetorical Communication; Forms of Frontal and Non-frontal Instruction (Group Work), of Education and Publicity (with the use of audio-visual teaching aids and media).*

*5. Only superficially can these be considered “formal courses”: a) they treat the ‘formalia’, the formal aspects of rhetoric and methodology by applying them to appropriate material, ‘realized’, b) work with rhetorical communication is always at the same time “materialized”, applied political education, because democratic behavior is being*

*practiced. This is where formal education becomes 'material' education. The institute pursues this goal on a scientific basis. For some it offers the opportunity to examine and further educate themselves. For others it offers the opportunity to take up the tasks of political formation and leadership. Political rhetoric should be liberated from the mode of declamation in the tradition of the "Grand Appeal to the Good Will of the Good People"; it should become more effective by the application of more rationality.*<sup>5</sup>

This curriculum makes it clear: The IRM "is not primarily concerned with improving people's conversation and speaking skills [...], but with altering them as a 'condition of the possibility' to change social practices."<sup>6</sup> Whether these precisely defined, admittedly very optimistically formulated goals could be achieved, that is, whether the work of the IRM had any influence on the politics of the Federal Republic of Germany, cannot be ascertained. It is however fair to say that the political consciousness of the participants changed, as did their communicative behavior, especially their democratic behavior. The examples of some target groups show this.

### **Seminars for "Education Officers"**

The rearmament of West Germany (promoted by the United States' anti-Soviet policy) forced the question of how to build a competent fighting force without violating the first article of the Federal Republic's Basic Law: "Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority." (GG Art 1,1) There is a paradox, a contradiction between the basic military operation of "command and obey" and the citizen who is competent to engage in free communication: on the one side the demand for absolute subordination to the point of blind obedience, which prepares "cannon fodder" to die for the Fatherland; on the other side the right to the free expression of opinion and personal responsibility for one's own actions as a citizen in a democratically constituted society. From this situation came the idea of "inner leadership," which should preserve the soldier's dignity as a "citizen in uniform." The task of implementing this idea fell to young officers, the "education officers," and group after group of them came to the IRM to learn methods that might facilitate the balancing act they had to perform: talking to the soldiers as human beings, not just chewing them out; breaking the habit of abusive recruit-jargon; listening, not just giving orders; involving subordinates in conversations, not just

giving them top-down instruction; learning new pedagogical procedures for managing groups rather than blindly defending old traditions; realizing that rank is not an argument, i.e. that subordinates think, too; understanding that there are "parliamentary" procedures for submitting and deciding upon proposals and, finally, that it is their, the officers', communicative competence that is of primary importance, and only secondarily that of the soldiers that report to them. None of these insights was delivered in a frontal way, but the participants could experience them in exercises based on historical cases (from the Nazi military in WWII, the situation in the Cold War, Viet Nam, Afghanistan, Irak Wars 1 and 2), and then discuss them in feedback sessions.

Even inner leadership cannot resolve the fundamental paradox, but it is possible to get leaders not only to learn new forms of interaction but also to notice how much their own self-respect and authority depend on the extent to which they attend to their responsibility for their "subordinates" as citizens. It is not a matter of techniques for conversation and speaking, but of conduct and attitude and these are moral categories, not parameters of fitness. Nor are conduct and attitude necessarily related to people in uniforms; there are civilians with exemplary conduct as well.

### **Seminars for Teachers**

In the very differentiated German education system, which — from kindergarten to the university level — does not admit of a totalizing overview, it would be necessary to further specify the term "teacher," were it not for one attribute that teachers seem to have in common: the belief that, as publicly acknowledged know-it-alls they are superior to other people. This is not a particularly communicative attitude, because it tends more toward some kind of didactic monologue than a listener-accessible form of mutual speech between equals. The attitude is supported by the institution "school," (in which duly appointed public servants meet with school-aged children), even if it is not required, in that, in school—according to an obsolete concept of education—it is all about the grown-ups having an effect on those who are still growing. This leads directly to a container model of communication: things that are worth knowing and that (in the view of the state) will be useful in future life are transferred, bit by bit, from full containers into empty ones, primarily through speech. It is unimaginable that this nonsensical idea of communication manages to survive, even though the

contrary has been known since the times of Humboldt and Schleiermacher at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; every speech act is the “mutual production” of the speaker and the listeners. This is true in the schools as well, because even children, and certainly adolescents and college students, “think,” have had experiences in *their* world, have developed — mainly through conversations — *their* “mental encyclopedia,” and want to learn new things for *their* life. But they can also experience how much the past, the Old impinges on the present, their New, that their life is a new beginning indeed, but that their feeling, thinking, speaking and movement are not being totally invented by them, but rather exist in a historical continuum.

Therefore the Seminars at the IRM attempt to strengthen teachers’ social competence; that is to reduce their reliance on “official authority,” on which they often rely exclusively, since they are used to being the person in the room with all the power. In terms of pedagogical method, the IRM’s approach means less frontal instruction and more group activity, more partner work and projects; in rhetorical terms it means fewer lectures and other kinds of instructional speech by the teacher, and more conversation. This begins, for example, when, once the teacher has announced the topic of study, groups determine for themselves what they want to talk about. In order to do this students must first become clear about what they are thinking, about what aspect of the topic is important to them, and that they must be prepared to listen to each other and to follow up with questions. In the event of differing or even contradictory opinions, reasons must be given instead of just maintaining a position — teachers, too, are obliged to give reasons! This “disputing with reasons” (arguing) is a central content of the seminar for objective-logical reasons, and for political reasons as well, because democracy is not a harmonious affair, it is contentious. Teachers struggle with this insight: How can their often authoritarian teaching style be reconciled with the young peoples’ claim to equal communicative rights, and their struggle to realize this claim? And even this question is only possible once it has been accepted that one *can* argue with high school and younger students, that they *are* permitted to decide some things. But the maxim is valid for both sides and without reservations: “The more thoroughly things are explained, the more reasonable the dispute can be, and the more responsibly the matter can be decided.”<sup>7</sup>

While the “fundamentals of conversation” can be learned in the basic seminar, a follow-up seminar

moves on to “forms of speech,”<sup>8</sup> that is talks (*Ansprachen*), informational presentations, persuasive speeches. Talks can be developed from personal experiences (personal narratives),<sup>9</sup> because they are must be adapted to the listeners and therefore they require a dialogical posture. Even for the instructive or didactic lecture and for informational speaking in general, “monologue” is only a formal designation. The manner of speaking, the asides that facilitate understanding and — in direct talks — the possibility to interrupt with questions: The posture of a dialogue is evident in all of this. For the sake of a dialogical relation to the listeners, it is better to speak from bullet points than to read from a prepared text, or to perform covert reading by delivering a memorized speech, because the speaker can respond immediately to the reactions from the audience, be they utterances, facial expressions, or gestures. For this reason a method is practiced for finding and developing “talking points,” a method that is accomplished by speech acts tailored to the “thinking by speaking” that promotes conversation. Another process, usually not necessary for teachers, be helpful for inexperienced speakers: describing the main points to others, then writing down what has been said and reading the written text aloud, after which the points that are still not clear are discussed, and the whole thing is finally summarized in key words.

The primary focus in these seminars is on the rhetorical competence of the teachers, not on instructional methods; it is important to distinguish between the “rhetorical communication that is common to all instruction” and a specialized “instruction in rhetorical communication,” in which the emphasis is on the speaking competence of young citizens. Rhetoricity is required of teachers not only in their actual teaching, but also in the communication with colleagues at meetings and conferences, and in counseling with students, in discussions with individual parents and in public school meetings.

### **Seminars for Parent Representatives**

The legal obligation for children to attend school forces parents to take an interest in school. This “interest” usually extends to the performance and successes of their own children, especially when the performance disappoints, is “troublesome”. Only then do parents consider whether it might be a good idea to talk to the teachers. Is my child the only one having problems, or is there something wrong with the teaching, maybe something peculiar about the teacher? How can I express my concerns? In general,

teachers are considered to be elevated by their authoritative position, their learning, their verbosity. It is (in Germany) not uncommon for parents who do not have college degrees to have inhibitions about talking to these “better informed” people, even in private consultation. Of course there are parent evenings, but who is so bold as to express his or her questions or criticisms publicly? It can be helpful if parents, as a group and according to valid rules, elect a teacher.

Communicative inequalities — whether real or only “felt” — can do real damage in human society. This is especially true in instances where decisions are being made that affect one’s life. School, as a seat of social authority, is such an instance. Therefore parents must not be limited to a mere “right to be heard,” rather they must be fully engaged in dialogue, and this means that, if they do not know how to do this, they have to learn. This is why the IRM has seminars for parents who have been chosen by other parents to represent common interests. This is why the IRM has “Seminars for Parent Advocates,” for “Parent Advisors.”

More important than any rhetorical skills that might be learned in these seminars is the courage to “work one’s way out of a minority — here in the sense of being a minor, of not being recognized as a responsible adult — that has become second nature.” Yes, the participants must be “encouraged” to speak, but that is only a first, albeit important step toward encouraging them to use their freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Step by step the seminars attempt to reduce the inhibitions mentioned above and to build up the participants’ confidence in their own “rhetorical competence.” Again, the path leads from personal narratives and receptive listening to clarifying conversations in small groups, to giving the rationale for one’s opinion. The next step, to dispute “with reasons” in a session of the entire seminar group, requires a lot of self-assurance, which will also be necessary in order to motivate other parents to common action. Now it is a matter of inviting people to — oral or written — discussions, leading these discussions, and making sure that practicable decisions are taken.

To do all this, and to negotiate with teachers and school boards, representatives must know how to run a meeting: all the mechanics of invitations, agendas, proposals, and voting. In order to practice at least the basics of parliamentary procedure, lively simulated debates — if they are conducted with pedagogical adroitness — can be a fun way to learn

about and acquire skills in these stiff and awkward legal processes, skills that can later prove useful. When the videos of these sessions are played back, the result is not only salvos of laughter, but also reflection, because people can see how in certain situations an unfortunate formulation can defeat a proposal.

In this way parent representatives can learn to exercise their rights, not only to look after the welfare of their children but at the same time to help the school become a “school community.” “A democratic community must have cause to be in deliberate and systematic education,” wrote John Dewey in 1916.<sup>11</sup> The critical path is “freedom of communication.” This opens “the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer the other by forceful suppression.”<sup>12</sup> Way back then Dewey called it “faith,” faith in the possibility of communication within democracy, a communication that stabilizes democracy.

## Consequences

In the mean time, not only the bloody wars of the last century, the decades of the Cold War, the present wars in Afghanistan and Irak, and the ceaseless global tensions have compromised the blind faith in the blessings of democracy, which hegemonic policies have degraded into an export article. It has been shown that even in democracy “an invisible but effective tyranny” (Deetz; 1990)<sup>13</sup> is at work. There is a gap between the election day and the everyday that neither good will or glib words can bridge: Communicative competence does not fill bellies; rhetorical competence does not prevent stock market crashes; the power of the unelected mighty is greater than that of the elected officials. But does this mean we should give up? Shut down the IRM? Better to disabuse ourselves of unrealistic expectations. Understand what Aristotle wrote in his *Politics*, that democracy is not a condition of eternal happiness, but rather a frail process, a chance, which must be won again and again, for a just conviviality. Of course, unlike in the myth, the gods have not imposed this never-ending task on just one individual; we are all Sisyphus now.

Democracies will continue to exist only if they renounce any blind faith in the future, if they exercise and foster criticism — as Adorno said in 1969: “Criticism is essential to all democracy [...] democracy is fairly defined by criticism.”<sup>14</sup>

Education, too, is now and in the future only possible in a critical mode. “Critical Perspectives on Communication Research and Pedagogy” was one ICC impulse a few years ago.<sup>15</sup> The critical posture is now even more urgent, for a theory of communication and for education in communication as well. That is, unless specialists want to abandon their responsibilities, to submit to the authority of, for example, the so-called “free market” or some other hierarchy, and relegate the control of the political to the Internet. But that would mean that responsible adults were relinquishing their independence and sinking back into the twilight of some atavistic herd. That would mean, basically, that we could not defend ourselves, at least not verbally—as the ancient Greeks said: *Lógon didónai* (to account for oneself)—that we were unable to account for ourselves and what we say, because—in the long run—we would destroy language, the characteristic that defines us and without which there is no responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

There is no easy way out, for this “... is the price human beings pay for freedom, and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future, is the price they pay for plurality and reality; for the joy in inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all.” (Arendt 1958, 244).<sup>17</sup>

Once again our considerations arrive at the relationship, invoked by the title of this presentation, between rhetorical competence and political responsibility. Perhaps this is *the* fundamental guiding principle of the ICC and the IRM. But it remains a mere invocation. “Critical competence” (‘Mündigkeit’) is more concrete and practicable as the goal of rhetorical communication. But then, too, it remains uncertain, whether all disputes can be settled in “public deliberation,” even if all citizens have become critical and competent. Rhetorical communication itself cannot produce certainty here; it can only work toward the conditions that make changes possible. The Sisyphus work goes on.

Translated by John Minderhout, Michigan

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<sup>2</sup> cf. COHEN, H. 1994. *The history of speech communication. The emergence of a discipline. 1914-1945.* Annandale, VA : National Communication Association.

<sup>3</sup> SCHRAMM, W. (Ed.). 1993. *The science of human communication.* New York

<sup>4</sup> Sprechen-Hören-Verstehen. Tonträger und sprachliche Kommunikation. (Höffe W./ Geissner H., eds.) *Sprache und Sprechen.* Bd. 1, 1968: Podiumdiskussion 98-117.

<sup>5</sup> WESSELA, E. 2004: Das Institut für Rhetorik und Methodik – IRM. In: *'Im Dienste Europas'.* Gollenstein 227-231; 228f.

<sup>6</sup> GEISSNER, H. K. 1993. "Demokratie und rhetorische Kommunikation", in *'Rhetorik für Europa'* (Dahmen R. / Herbig A./ Wessela E., eds.) Berlin 19-32; 25.

<sup>7</sup> GEISSNER, H. K. Grundlagen der Gesprächsrhetorik. In: GEISSNER-LEUCK-SCHWANDT-SLEMBEK 1998 (2008): *Gesprächsführung/Führungsgespräche.* St. Ingbert 11-33; 28.

<sup>8</sup> cf. GEISSNER, H. K. 1973 (1986): Rhetorik und politische Bildung. Frankfurt und GEISSNER H.K. 1995: Vom Gespräch zur Rede. Zur Didaktik der rhetorischen Kommunikation. In: *Konzepte rhetorischer Kommunikation* (Herbig A. F., ed.) St. Ingbert 11-24.

<sup>9</sup> cf. LANGELLIER, K. M., & PETERSON, E. E. 2004: *Storytelling in daily life: Performing narrative.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

<sup>10</sup> *"Ermunterung zur Freiheit". Rhetorik und Erwachsenenbildung* (Geissner H., ed.) Frankfurt 1990. (Mit Beiträgen der amerikanischen ICC-Teilnehmer Deetz, Casmir, Cohen, Franklin, Hadwiger, Langellier, Peterson, Sewell, Spear, Sprague und [Lehtonen].)

<sup>11</sup> DEWEY, J. 1993. *The political writings* (Morris D. & Shapiro I., eds.) Indianapolis/ Cambridge; 110

<sup>12</sup> cf. 11, 243.

<sup>13</sup> DEETZ, S. 1990. Democracy, competence, and the pedagogy of critical discourse. In: 10, 93-106; 95; cf. ders. 1992: *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization.* State University of New York Press.

<sup>14</sup> ADORNO, Th. W. 1971. *Kritik.* Frankfurt/Main 10-19; 10.

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- <sup>15</sup> cf. LEHTONEN, J. (ed.) 1995. *Critical perspectives on communication research and pedagogy*. St. Ingbert.
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