

Full Length Research Paper

Teaching rhetoric today: Ancient exercises for contemporary citizens

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Since July 2013, our research team has been working on a project that aims at re-introducing rhetorical exercises in Belgian secondary (high) schools and at studying their effects on the pupils. Our hypothesis is that the regular practice of rhetorical exercises, inspired by those practised in Antiquity, could stimulate skills like open-mindedness, flexibility, creativity, empathy, tolerance, and *proudhness*, in a multicultural context. The experimental course is based on the principle of the “*dissoi logoi*” (twofold arguments), an exercise probably invented by the first Sophists, in order to suspend personal opinion during the exercise and to focus on technique and performance. The results of the experiments are very encouraging. After a couple of lessons the pupils were able to apply rhetorical notions in their compositions; they developed richer argumentations, by taking other points of view into account, and skills that, according to the teachers, improve their everyday life at school.

Key words: Rhetoric, practical reason, education, writing, citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

Three years ago, our research team, the GRAL (Groupe de recherche en Rhétorique et Argumentation Linguistique, led by Emmanuelle Danblon at the Université libre de Bruxelles), started an innovative project in Brussels, involving rhetorical exercises similar to those practiced during Antiquity. The aim is to test our fundamental hypothesis: a regular practice of rhetorical exercises such as those used in Antiquity can stimulate several skills like open-mindedness, curiosity, creativity, empathy, tolerance or *proudhness*. In this paper, we would like to expose the roots of this project, its progress and our first promising results that seem to confirm this preliminary hypothesis. In the first part of this paper, we will expose the historical and societal background of

those exercises, and the reasons why they were reintegrated into classrooms. In the second part, the experimental procedure, the technical and theoretical framework of the exercises will be explained. Finally, in the third part, the first results and perspectives for the future will be shown.

METHODS

Historical background

The exercises we chose are inspired by the Greek and Latin rhetorical theories developed during Antiquity. They take their roots in the classical Athens (around the fifth century BC). During this

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period, the Greek city began one of the most important political upheavals in the occidental world: the establishment of democracy (Hansen, 1999). It is important to say that there were neither professional politicians nor professional lawyers at the time: every citizen (in other words, every free man born from Athenian parents) had to take part in the political and forensic assemblies. Not only had they to vote, but they also had to argue for their positions and to convince the assembly. In such a context, mastering speech and public speaking was crucial for the good execution of the institutions. Some specialists in these fields began to propose remunerated trainings. These specialists were called the Sophists, and the discipline they taught, rhetoric (Jaeger, 1944, vol. I; de Romilly, 1988; Kerferd, 1981; Hansen, 1999; Pernot, 2000: 21-45; 2014).

The context of its birth shows the strong links that bind rhetoric and equality. Unfortunately, we only have little information about the Sophists' practice but rhetoric quickly spread all over the Greek and Roman world. Many theoretical treatises were written and rhetoric was taught to every well-born man. The oldest and most important treatise was Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (for an introduction to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, see Kennedy 1991), which had and still has an important influence on other rhetorical theories. Basically, Aristotelian rhetoric relies on a system of proofs: the extrinsic proofs are those that exist beyond the speech and that are not created by the orator (the testimonies or the laws, for example). The technical proofs are constructed through the speech:

1. The *ethos* is the proof based on the portrayal that the orator gives of himself or of another person.
2. The *pathos* is the proof based on emotions.
3. The *logos* is the proof based on logical reasoning and on the choice of relevant arguments.

This theoretical framework will guide us through the description of the experiment. Our information about the teaching of rhetoric in Classical Greece is deficient, but we have a good knowledge of the rhetorical training during the beginning of the Roman Empire (first centuries AD) from several and reliable sources. The rhetorical formation was based on both theory and practice. In addition to theoretical treatises, there are more practical manuals and indirect sources (letters, biographies, quotations, and so on). Also, there is some papyrological evidence (Cribiore, 2005; Sans and Vanthieghem, 2017), which shows us the everyday practice in rhetorical schools.

Rhetorical training in Greek and Roman antiquity

In the Greco-Roman world, rhetoric was the last step of the ancient educational system, except for students who chose to study a more specific course, like philosophy or medicine. Concretely speaking, the great majority of men from the higher parts of the society were trained by the rhetoric teacher, called the *rhetor*. This training prepared them for the public life. The first step was the so-called "*progymnasmata*" (the preparatory exercises). This relatively homogenous set of exercises was organized so that the complexity would gradually increase, from small writing tasks to complex argumentative developments. Students began with imitating famous models and then, in a second time, gradually started to create their own compositions. Each exercise aimed at practicing a particular rhetorical skill. The complete list is too long to be exhaustively described here (for more details on *progymnasmata*, Pernot, 2000; Webb, 2001; Kennedy, 2003; for concrete examples of *progymnasmata*, also Gibson, 2008), so only two examples are given:

1. The *ethopoeia* is an exercise that involves imagining the speech that would pronounce a person in a specific context. *E. g.*: what

would a mother say to her son who goes to war?

2. The *ekphrasis* is a vivid depiction that could provoke a specific emotion. *E.g.*: the description of a luxurious garden that could provoke a relieving emotion.

Due to these exercises, students were ready to go to the second step of their training: the declamations. Technically speaking, declamations were fictive speeches imagined by learners or professional rhetors (Bonner, 1949; Winterbottom, 1974, 1980; Russell, 1983), either for training or for entertaining (Pernot, 2000: 200-202; Sans, 2015). There were two kinds of declamations: the *suasoria*, in which an action is either recommended or misadvised and the *controversy*, a trial simulation based on the application of a given law to a specific case, in which the student had to imagine a speech either to accuse or to defend a person. Here is an example wrongly attributed to the Latin rhetor Quintilian:

"Cold water given to a stepson"

A man had a son. When he lost the boy's mother, he married another wife. The son fell gravely ill. Doctors were called and they said that he would die if he drank cold water. The stepmother gave him cold water. The youth died. The stepmother is accused of poisoning by her husband. (Ps-Quint., *Lesser Decl.*, 350; translated by Shachleton Bailey).

Even if it has often been ill conceived, this kind of exercise offers many advantages for rhetorical teaching. First, it represents a typical situation in which argumentation and rhetorical abilities are needed, and which immediately seems interesting and relevant to learners and stimulate them to produce arguments. Secondly, it can be interestingly adapted to a contemporary audience. Indeed, in Ancient treatises, this exercise was often used to illustrate and train the theory of "issues" (Russel, 1983; Berry and Heath, 1997; Heath, 1994; 1995, 1997; Sans, 2015): a theoretical system which permits the recognition of each type of issue and the main arguments available; the example quoted earlier, for instance, falls under the "definition" or "assimilation" issue, because the deed (giving water) does not exactly correspond to the charge (poisoning). New exercises, more appropriate for modern pupils, can then be created by applying the same principle.

Finally, if *controversia* was the crowning of the rhetorical *curriculum*, and the most complicated exercise of the training, it is still relevant from a pedagogical point of view to take it as a starting point. On the one hand, pupils feel more interested in the task, because it is a bigger challenge and on the other hand, as they have to accomplish the same kind of task through the year, their progression and the technical skills they acquire can be easily brought to light. This is because pupils have the feeling to progress and they get even more motivated. It is also interesting for the teacher; the complexity of the task allows him or her to approach various aspects of argumentation theories through one single exercise. Such exercise was taught during centuries in European universities and high schools. Still at the end of the nineteenth century, they disappeared from the teaching *curricula* (the word *Rhétorique* was erased from the French official teaching *curricula* in 1902; Douay-Soubelin, 1999). Today, in Belgium, a formation to argumentation is proposed to pupils in the context of the French class at the end of the secondary school (Scheepers, 2013). But the content of this formation is not clearly defined and is often quite superficial. The bet of our research team is to reintegrate rhetorical exercises in the present day Belgian schools. We will now explain the reasons of this choice.

Why teaching rhetoric today?

Our teaching is based on quite a simple principle: learning rhetoric and casting a technical eye on argumentation neutralize the

opinions during the exercise. To do so, we take inspiration from the *dissoi logoi* (twofold arguments) invented by the first sophists, which consisted in arguing successively for two opposite points of view. In order to do so, the learner needs to leave aside his personal opinions in the frame of the exercise, to feel the plurality of possibilities and emotions connected to each point of view. Then, he has to find good solutions and arguments for each side. Besides, by composing their opponents' argumentation, the learners realise the reasonableness of the adverse position (Pearce, 1994; Levine Gera, 2000; Ferry and Sans 2015a: 98-100). We decided to combine this principle, which can potentially be applied to other ancient exercises, with the practice of the controversies.

Recent research in pedagogy and cognitive sciences show that practicing such exercises may be useful to develop some faculties, like open-mindedness, flexibility, creativity or empathy (Berthoz, 2004, 2010; Ferry, 2014; Ferry and Sans, 2015a). These abilities are important factors that can be used to develop tolerance towards others and in the conflict reduction (Tuller et al., 2015). This could be particularly helpful in a multicultural city like Brussels; where around 200 000 inhabitants of 163 different nationalities (Brussels authorities' official data's <https://www.bruxelles.be/artdet.cfm/4389>) live together. Still, even though the rhetorical exercises had already been studied from a theoretical point of view, in a university context, in order to achieve a better understanding of the theoretical treatises (especially Heath, 2007), the benefits of such a training on the cognitive and societal skills of teenagers, especially in a secondary school context, had never been concretely studied. That is why our research team decided three years ago to revive the practice of rhetorical exercises in secondary schools and university, in collaboration with schools, teachers and official authorities.

Rhetorical exercises in classrooms

In order to put our hypotheses to the test, we adapted different exercises based on the *controversies* and the *dissoi logoi* principle, and proposed them to pupils and students. These exercises allowed us to study the effects on the pupils' abilities from different points of view. Following the structure and the theoretical principles adopted by the ancient rhetors, it is possible to create new exercises based on actual trials or everyday life, school-related or not (Kock, 2012), like in the following examples:

“Bull's eye”

Rule: any aggression against another pupil or staff member may warrant expulsion

It was about 10:40 am when the young history teacher, who was hired this year, came to the schoolyard for surveillance. The pupils were playing basketball and the game seemed very tight. When the teacher turned his back, he was suddenly hit at the head by the ball, and lightly wounded. He easily identified the shooter: a gifted, but unruly pupil that he had punished many times for misbehaviour during his class. This time, the teacher accused him of aggression and demanded his expulsion.

“Superstitions”

Rule: I have the right to be respected by the other pupils and the pedagogical staff.

Elodie is a gifted and joyful girl, but she is also superstitious: never would she forget to check the horoscope, never would she stroke a black cat. Today, the horoscope is bad: Elodie has to pass an

important geometry test and has a bad feeling about it. On her way to the mathematics class, she discovers that a worker is repainting above the door and has put a ladder in front of it. All the pupils positioned their heads down and entered the class, but Elodie refused to move despite the teacher's repeated orders. The teacher expelled her from the class and gave her 0 for the test.

The data presented here are taken from the experiment led this year (2015 to 2016) with a group of twenty-five pupils aged fifteen in a Brussels school practicing positive discrimination, in the frame of the French class. Each exercise is written and filmed, so we can analyse the results very precisely. Our teaching program is built around two kinds of lessons or sessions (1h30, once a month). In the first session type, which was dedicated to the controversia, pupils were asked to work individually and argue freely, as good as they can, for both sides (prosecution and defence). The pupils presented their speeches before their classmates; we formed random pairs of pupils who took side by casting lot. Their classmates played the role of an audience but instead of voting with their own opinion, they were asked to evaluate the performance and strategy of both orators. This was possible due to the technical criteria they learned (for instance, does the orator seem truthful? Does his speech raise emotions? Are his arguments clear, original, relevant? How does he do that?). This creates a very dynamic and positive atmosphere where only performance counts.

This practical exercise constitutes the starting point of a more theoretical kind of lesson, where we draw pupils' attention on various technical aspects of argumentation from to their own compositions. More technical or problematic points are illustrated and practised through more specific exercises. In this way we follow the program of many ancient treatises, especially Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and respect what the Ancients called the “orator's tasks” (Pernot, 2000: 89-92). The first step, *inventio*, is the knowledge of the various kinds of proofs and the ability to properly select them in a given situation. The second step, called *dispositio*, is the organization of the speech in different parts or developments (such as introduction, narrative, description, argumentation, refutation, and conclusion). The next step, *elocutio*, is the expression of the arguments in appropriate style. The pupils will then choose which of the techniques to use in the following practical sessions and will test their efficiency.

Here is an example of a more theoretical session: the treatment of emotions. Even though they are often disregarded, emotions surround us and play an essential part in our ability to make good decisions (Ortony et al., 1988; Damasio, 1994; Plantin, 1998; Micheli, 2010). The marginalization of emotions is thus, not only unreasonable, because we cannot avoid them, but also dangerous, because ignoring emotions prevents us from properly managing them. Like we already saw when approaching the Aristotelian rhetorical system, in ancient times, the importance of the emotional ability and the necessity to develop a rhetorical framework to manage it in a society was understood. Though this awareness is clear in theoretical treatises, no practical exercise devoted to this aspect has been conserved. At this juncture we had to create an exercise, to make learners practice this aspect of the social life. Pupils were asked to work on the following event:

“Marc and Veronica”

Around 8am, Marc, 45, salesperson in an appliance store, hit Veronica, a 35-year-old promising CEO. Veronica was not crossing on the crosswalk. She was having a phone conversation with a colleague at the moment of impact; she was not looking and did not see the car. She died before rescuers arrived. Marc was eager to take his children to school; he was driving at a speed of 47 km/h;

the traffic light near the crossroad had just turned yellow.

Following the *dissoi logoi* principle, they had to write two reports: one that induces sympathy for the victim (Veronica) and one that induces sympathy for the driver (Marc). The aim of the exercise is to make them feel the appropriateness of emotions.

Unfortunately, it will not be possible in the frame of this article to give an extensive description of all the exercises we tested. We made several other specific exercises, like *ethopoiia* and *ekphrasis* mentioned earlier. These were carried out in order to teach other notions and techniques like *ethos*, arguments' types, rhetorical narrative or description, so that the pupils got a larger set of knowledge to tackle the free sessions devoted to a *controversy* exercise. We can now move to the results of this year's experiment.

RESULTS

In this section, we will expose the first results of the experiment, and show its benefits. As mentioned previously, different points of view were taken into account. But before going deeper into this discussion, it is worth noticing that pupils are clearly involved into the task. Indeed, when pupils are confronted for the first time to an exercise such as those we saw earlier, they are generally enthusiastic and excited to try this new activity. They really seem to enjoy it, even though these sessions take place at a bad time (Friday afternoon, just before the week-end) and the exercise was not graded. These two elements could have prejudiced the success of the experiment, because pupils are tired and less focused, especially if they are not motivated by a final mark. Still, during a whole year, the pupils' interest did not decrease. They were eager to show what they found and this stimulated them to look for increasingly creative arguments. This involvement is positive for both the pupils, who are working and learning abstract concepts and are still having fun; and for the teacher, whose task is made considerably easier.

Technical point of view

Rhetoric presents several technical difficulties, and pupils have to learn how to manage them. We clearly saw an evolution in their abilities. In the beginning of the experiment, they often focused on one aspect of the problem and fell into irrelevant discussions. For instance, we submitted to them the case of a fool who committed murder. For such case, it was not enough to show that the fool was guilty, but it was also important to question his accountability for his crime. In their accusation speeches, most of the pupils focused on the material evidences that proved guiltiness and simply missed the other, and most important, aspect. As a result, the defence, which systematically argued that the fool was not fully conscious of his deed, always had a better evaluation, because pupils thought that their speeches

were more complete and relevant. This also means that although they had to argue for both sides, the accusation did not anticipate the arguments of the defence. More generally, they were successful in adopting another point of view and did show some kind of empathy (for instance, in the cases involving a teacher), but they made no links between both points of view (Ferry and Sans, 2015a). Most of the time, they affirmed and enumerated arguments without consistence or order.

But after only a few sessions, we observed some sensible progresses. First, they did not miss the problem anymore and went deeper into the discussion. Secondly, they spontaneously used the techniques they had learned. On the level of *logos*: their argumentations were richer, more convincing and tackled several relevant aspects. Sometimes, they even treated both sides with the same argument type (that means, for instance, arguing from the consequences of the judgement in each case). On the level of *pathos*, they managed to create and master emotions, like pity or shame. The *Marc and Veronica* exercise is a good indication of their progression. At first, they did not realize that some emotional strategies could not be used. For example, in order to induce sympathy for Marc, some of them simply blamed Veronica saying that she should have been more careful while crossing the street. Still, blaming the victim is not *appropriate*, partly because of the legitimate sadness of her relatives. Pointing out Marc's sadness and feeling of guilt is a more appropriate strategy, because it does induce sympathy for Marc, but without denying the severity of the situation and the feelings of Veronica's family (for a more detailed review of the exercise, Ferry and Sans, 2015b).

After practicing rhetorical exercises for several weeks, pupils were able to feel the appropriateness of emotions in a given context and avoid aggressive strategies. Finally, and accordingly, pupils also understood the notion of *ethos* and paid attention to their own image as well as the portrayal of the different character's involved in the case. For instance, playing teachers or accusers, their *ethos* was at first severely a caricature, overbearing, and they seemed unpleasant. They later became more benevolent, self-confident, showing humanity and respect to commonly shared values. On the level of *disposition*, even if the composition of the arguments sometimes lacked of organization, pupils began to add some words of introduction or conclusion and to support their argumentation or evoke emotions, thanks to narrative or vivid depiction (*ekphrasis*). But the most important point to notice is that pupils did all of that consciously and were able to name and explain the techniques or strategies they used, which shows that the theoretical notions have been deeply integrated. They began to enjoy using the capacities they master, feel pleased and proud when they are recognized. On the other hand, they also quickly learned the technical vocabulary, used it in their

comments; and in so doing so, they developed their critical mind. Another important point is that pupils progressively acquired new skills that they had not learned in the previous theoretical sessions. After a few months, we saw that concessions and *prolepsis* appeared in their copies, with their typical linguistic marks (like “even if”, “although”, “I am well aware that..., but nevertheless...” and so on). This indicates that from then on they were not only able to adopt another point of view, but also to take it in account and to make links between both sides. They were able to produce all the relevant and qualified argumentations since they consider other possible points of view, to which they recognize some qualities, even if they do not adhere to it. This result is particularly important, because it shows that rhetorical exercises may well be useful to improve our living together, for, as was mentioned before, respecting others’ point of view is the first step to peacefully manage conflict.

Teacher’s point of view

Finally, these kinds of exercises offer many advantages from the teacher’s point of view: it increases pupils’ motivation and provides a concrete theoretical and practical framework for the learning of argumentation. Indeed, this subject is in the official *curriculum* and teachers have to train pupils to argumentation, but no indications are given to know how to actually do it. We know from teachers’ testimonies, and even from pupils themselves, that the skills learned during the rhetoric class are used in other contexts, outside the specific sessions. For instance, they take benefit from them and apply them in their class meetings, or even in their everyday relations and discussions at school. They can support their own opinion better, convince the others or find better solutions by considering and respecting others’ opinions. They are also able to take some distance on touchy topics and to argue like they are trained to in the exercises.

Perspectives for the future: Rhetoric tools for tomorrow citizens

The experiment is still in progress but the first results are really positive and encouraging. In the future, we will continue the rhetorical class of our main group of pupils, and also try to extend this research project to other classrooms in other schools, in order to give accurate tools to critically face the world that they are living in and to properly respond to it. To that end, since 2015, we have also been proposing trainings to teachers, to enable them transmit the rhetorical tools themselves and take benefit from our experience. Of course, developing such

abilities takes time and regularity and may be difficult. Our hope is then to propose a long time training, in order to develop not only technical but also ethical and relational abilities. Indeed, we are convinced that rhetoric could help teenagers in their societal relations and to fulfil their role as future citizens of a democratic society.

First, in order to succeed in the realization of the exercise, pupils have to use what they consider as common values of our society. That question of the common values, but also of the pupils’ feelings about the society is often too delicate to be directly questioned, for both pedagogical and psychological reasons. Teenagers often mistrust adults, in the school environment in particular, making it difficult to talk about these essential points (Larrigue, 2001: 73-75; Duru-Bellat and Van Zanten, 2012: 224-226). Rhetorical exercises provide an interesting indirect approach and may give us a good indication on the values they share (Dainville, 2016) and that they have actually integrated. Indeed, in the frame of the exercise, they spontaneously express them and discuss their application in concrete cases, without prior ethical recommendations from the teacher. This also leads them to think about their visions of the world, to question it, without feeling oppressed or condemned by an authority. Students need to have opportunities to think about sensitive issues by themselves to really integrate them (Verdelhan-Bourgade, 2001: 176).

Secondly, a theoretical awareness of argumentation helps pupils to distinguish an argument from the person who puts it forwards. In the framework of the exercise, they have to *suspend their judgement* by defending opinions they do not share.

This technical ability allows them to better understand other opinions and to train their minds’ flexibility (Danblon, 2013). Research in cognitive sciences tend to show that, thanks to that, they can develop their critical mind towards fanaticism, and be more respectful towards each other. Rhetoric is not a magical tool. Still, considering the situation of the world today, considering the situation in Belgium and Europe, we truly believe that our bet is worth trying, and that rhetoric could help future citizens in their tasks.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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