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## **A Reflection on the Digitization of Classical Rhetoric for Pedagogical Uses**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In today's world, the traditional means of the dissemination of knowledge have become replaced by advanced digital platforms. This, alongside the context of the global pandemic that has propelled the usage of technological tools in the classroom, has created a conducive environment for innovative pedagogy. In this paper, a case for the digitization of classical rhetorical texts for pedagogical purposes is presented. To do this, principles of digital rhetoric are brought up followed by various examples of how the digital has been embraced (in the context of the wider principles of digital rhetoric) already in the pedagogical sphere. Finally, a potential proposal for an extension of the present work was put forward. Digitization and technology widely are the norms of our day and age. In viewing these elements from a pedagogical perspective, what can be seen is that there is an enormous opportunity not only in teaching the students that will walk through our doors but in preserving the rhetorical tradition that intrigues and fascinates the larger community of scholarship.

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### **1. Introduction**

The digitization of print media has been arguably amongst the most significant characterizers of the digital age. Whilst still very much in existence, the physical textbook, the notebook/pen duo, and other paper materials have lost their commonplaceness. The generation of today, all the way from the K-12 to the graduate level, exists within a technological atmosphere that is vastly different than what their predecessors experienced. For those seeking out education today, what this often means is increased opportunities for technical education alongside increased access to the tools and infrastructure to facilitate this. However, at an even more fundamental level, technology, and its elements such as digitization are used to narrow gaps in access, present material previously restricted through ink and paper through a variety of complements, and ideally, allow for skill development in more effective ways. In today's world, the interest and demand for educational technology and digitization have only been propelled considering the necessity brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. And naturally, it is in these times that reflection can lend a great deal to both, understanding past practices and improving future ones.

### **2. Digital Rhetoric**

Digital rhetoric is a discipline whose name is the amalgamation of two very broad terms. Both terms themselves, are arguably unlimited in their scope, and often carry with them their own presumptions in whatever context they find themselves in. Appropriately then, the same can be extended to the larger combined term. This is even more complicated in the sense that digital rhetoric, despite its prevalence in scholarly discussions and widespread pedagogical deployment, has not yet become fully established as its own field (Eyman, 2015, p. 12). Despite this, in recent years, scholarship including James Zappen, Douglas Eyman, Aaron Hess, and Joshua Reeves, amongst many more, have made considerable progress in advancing discourse regarding the topic, addressing important facets such as theorizing, strategizing, and defining the topic.

The field is one that can be considered relatively new, given the relative recency of the digital age. In defining the field, the habit of rhetoricians in "validating the ways of their community" is important to notice here. Already, rhetoric has a nature of being, paradoxically, one of the oldest and one of the youngest disciplines (Goggin, 1997, p. 322). Digital rhetoric, arguably, had existed as soon as digital communication became feasible. It became, as a term, both introduced and formalized "in a lecture Richard Lanham delivered in 1989 and that was subsequently crystallized in his 1993 book *The Electronic Word*" (Hodgson & Barnett,

2016). That being said, in the same way, that “rhetoric has been variously defined throughout history”, with no conclusive definition, so should it be realized that digital rhetoric, a subfield of the overarching discipline, shares the same character (McNally, 1970, p. 71).

Of course, the definition is imperative. It allows for an examination of a given issue without the distraction of digression. In that sense, two brief definitions are called upon, one, posed by Eyman, and the other by Mary Hocks. According to Eyman, in his text “Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice”, Digital Rhetoric is defined as “the application of rhetorical theory (as analytic method or heuristic for production) to digital texts and performances” (Eyman, 2015, p. 44). What we see here is that digital rhetoric is something practical, where the theory of the field is applied to the digital sphere. Hocks’ definition allows for this to be seen in a more extended fashion, that “digital rhetoric describes a system of ongoing dialogue and negotiations among writers, audiences, and institutional contexts, but it focuses on the multiple modalities available for making meaning using new communication and information technologies” (Hocks, 2003, p. 632). Both definitions, like spoken about before, stress a field that exists *in action*.

Thus, what lies behind the syntactical definition of the term is an amalgamation of practices. That begs the question, what exactly are these? Eyman, building off the work of James Zappen, presented eight of these in his text (which Eyman referred to as the activities of digital rhetoric) (Eyman, 2015, p. 44).

1. The use of rhetorical strategies in production and analysis of digital text
2. Identifying characteristics, affordances, and constraints of new media
3. Formation of digital identities
4. Potential for building social communities
5. Inquiry and development of rhetorics of technology
6. The use of rhetorical methods for uncovering and interrogating ideologies and cultural formation in digital work
7. An examination of the rhetorical function of networks
8. Theorization of agency when interlocutors are as likely to be software agents (or “spimes”) as they are human actors

As can be seen, these practices have the potential for great intersection and cannot as thus be seen in a vacuum. Yet, as much as this is the case, digital rhetoric is as adaptable as the platform (namely, the digital space) that it is being expressed through. Thus, it may be constrained to simply one or two practices, or even potentially practices outside of Eyman’s list. That being said, Casey Boyle’s summarizes digital rhetoric practice well, in writing that the “practice digital rhetoric is to participate in a transductive process of in-formation through a series of incorporations that involve culture, technology, and biology along with many more registers” (Boyle et al., 2018, p. 258).

### **3. Digital Rhetoric and Pedagogy**

The definitions and practices associated with digital rhetoric discussed before are enough to theorize what a pedagogical application might and can look like. Eyman delves into pedagogical case studies in Chapter 4. Digital rhetoric, by and large, has followed the pedagogical tradition of modern rhetorical studies, in that its explicit instruction, on a practical basis, has been concentrated within the composition studies context. This is something that should be viewed as an advantage. Composition in the United States is a required course that must be taken by every university student to successfully earn their degrees, with few exceptions. Instructors of composition, who, as a whole, function very much as the “gatekeepers” for further study, have a great deal of responsibility.

In our current digital age, a given course that does not instruct the students going through it in the context of the lived environment that they exist within is a lost opportunity. To successfully do this, however, instructors themselves must be informed. This, of course, would happen most naturally and effectively within Rhetoric & Composition graduate programs, which historically evolved out of voices in the 1970’s protesting “both the pattern and purpose of graduate training in English”, which at the time, was focused “almost exclusively on the literary study” (Chapman & Tate, 1987, p. 124). These arguments, such as that by John Gerber, that “traditional literary specialization ignored the realities of the profession, and that graduate education should be devoted to ‘the acquisition of skills, not merely subject matter’” ultimately manifested themselves in the creation of the Rhetoric & Composition specialty (Chapman & Tate, 1987, p. 124) Accordingly, there are ninety-four doctoral programs in Rhetoric & Composition today (rhetmap.org, n.d.).

Thus, it is only appropriate that digital pedagogy will have a place in graduate programs of Rhetoric & Composition, given the fact that the very origins of the field in modern academia were laid with an eye towards practicality. It is noteworthy digital media has already, in various ways, come into the Rhetoric & Composition classroom. Eyman brings up a few of these in the discussion. For instance, “Sarah Arroyo’s graduate Seminar on Digital Rhetoric, taught in spring 2009 at California State University, Long Beach; Byron Hawk’s undergraduate Advanced Writing—Digital Rhetoric course taught in fall 2010 at the University of South Carolina;

and my [Eyman's] own undergraduate course on Web Authoring and Design, taught in spring 2011 at George Mason University" (Eyman, 2015, p. 113).

In brevity, Arroyo's course surveys digital rhetoric, ultimately culminated in independent production, with the theoretical portion of the course "exclusively on contemporary rhetorical theory (Eyman, 2015, p. 114). Alongside the usage of the "Ning" platform, which "which allows users to quickly and easily set up a shared social networking site", the emphasis of the course is on "producing digital texts (rather than only on traditional seminar papers) as the main product composed by students in the course" (Eyman, 2015, p. 115). Byron Hawk's course, one taught at the undergraduate level, also uses Ning to allow for the creation of a class-based social networking platform (Eyman, 2015, p. 116). As the course description states, students ultimately discuss "key rhetorical concepts in relation to digital spaces, explore those concepts in the contexts of blogging and social networking" and then have "the opportunity to engage those concepts through a final digital writing project of their own" (Eyman, 2015, p. 116). Eyman's own course focuses "almost exclusively on production" with the "majority of the coursework consists of completing a series of design and coding activities" including assignments in XHTML/CSS and those particularly centered around the web design and development process (Eyman, 2015, p. 117-118).

These are just a few examples compiled from Eyman's text. The courses related to digital rhetoric mentioned here are by no means exhaustive, and it is not uncommon to see technologically based coursework standing as requirements or electives within Rhetoric & Composition programs in the United States.

#### 4. Extending the Application

Much of what has been discussed until now pertains to instruction dedicated to digital rhetoric. This is important because if we refer to Eyman's eight practices of digital rhetoric, we can infer that in delivering to students the understandings of the wider topic, we also allow for them to gain far beyond the mere completion of a course on their academic transcripts. Digital skills and an understanding of technology are imperative for employment in today's competitive job markets. Digital rhetoric, arguably in contrast to what one could consider "fully" technical fields such as computer science or information technology, allows those who study it to benefit from two components, a "digital" one, and a "rhetorical" one, as its name naturally suggests. This is best summarized by James Porter, in stating "Technical knowledge is integral to digital rhetoric, but that knowledge is not merely mechanical, routinized procedure" (Porter, 2009, p. 220). Indeed:

The *techné* of digital rhetoric required here must be of two types: (1) productive how-to knowledge—i.e., the art of knowing various technological options and knowing how to use them to achieve various rhetorical effects; and (2) practical judgment, ethical phronesis—i.e., the ability to ask and answer critical questions about one's choices, such as what serves the common good, what are the human implications of various options, who is in/excluded, who is helped/hurt, who is empowered/disempowered by various technology designs. (Porter, 2009, p. 220)

The second part of Porters' assertion invokes curiosity or that which calls upon the more rhetorical side of digital application. One can safely opine that to truly understand digital rhetoric, one must be grounded in "non-digital" rhetorical theory. And of course, this naturally manifested itself in the evolution of the digital age, where many traditional rhetorical scholars adapted their research interests and very much "grew up" alongside technology. Of course, as time has gone on and technology has progressed, it is reasonable to assume that the current and of course, future generations of scholarship in the field will have been raised significantly, if not completely, within fully digital pedagogical environments.

In this context, one can turn their attention to the fundamental rhetorical instruction that would often be targeted towards advanced undergraduate English majors, or most usually, graduate students of Rhetoric & Composition. Rhetoric, interestingly, is grounded in what Jeffrey Walker described as a "teaching tradition" without which would render rhetoric, essentially, "not rhetoric", and turn it into "just another kind of philosophy or literary criticism" (Hauser, 2004, p. 39). Hauser summarizes the relationship between civic education and rhetoric in the Western rhetorical tradition, something that at least ideally, remains true today (Hauser, 2004, p. 40). Alistair Miller reiterates this in mentioning that "the lost classical ideal of a liberal education founded on rhetoric", was "the very embodiment of an educational philosophy that seeks to develop practical reason or judgment together with self-knowledge" (Miller, 2007, p. 183-184).

Recalling the discussion on digital rhetoric and pedagogy, one question that may be brought up pertains to how classical rhetoric is taught today. To this end, some questions can be posed. For one, if rhetoric stems from a pedagogical tradition, then how should a modern version of rhetorical pedagogy look like? And if this pertains to technology, which it undoubtedly does in some way, then how can the rhetorical tradition, as valuable as it is, be delivered most effectively? Today's context, at least for the student of Rhetoric & Composition, is a technological one. In that sense, instructors of rhetoric should think about technological applications, such as web or interactive texts, audiobooks, or other types of multimedia to support our instruction. To gain some insight into this, we can also look at precedent with an eye towards what currently exists, and where the gaps lie.

## **5. Existing Work**

Already, there has been some work towards the development of resources, either explicitly or inexplicitly, that supports (or can support) the teaching of rhetoric in the digital sphere. Whilst certainly not exhaustive, these can serve as case studies for application and/or foundations that can be built off. Three specific resources can be examined:

- 1) Professor George Pullman's teaching website ([gpullman.com](http://gpullman.com))
- 2) *Kairos*: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy
- 3) Audiobooks: Plato's "Gorgios" and "Phaedrus", narrated by Ray Childs

Pullman serves as Professor of English (Rhetoric) at Georgia State University. His career started out in the study of the history of rhetoric, eventually transitioning to technical writing and digital rhetoric. As his teaching also is centered around instruction in both classic and digital rhetoric, his pedagogy makes for an interesting case study. Pullman's "History and Theory of Rhetoric and Composition I" course, accessed at the following: <https://www.gpullman.com/8170/syllabus.php> represents a prime example of how classical rhetoric may be taught in the digital environment. The website functions as an instructional web textbook that was created by Pullman, and thus includes much of his commentary, as well as links that complement the respective text or excerpt from the early period of the Western rhetorical tradition (which the course focuses on).

Keeping in mind that this is an advanced course designed for graduate Rhetoric and Composition students, Pullman's model has many noteworthy aspects that show where digitization can meet fundamental rhetorical instruction. For instance, for the instruction pertaining to Alcimadas, one of his famous excerpts is presented, which comes from LaRue Van Hook's translation of "On the Sophists". In this part of Pullman's web text, he not only provides the translation but alongside it, he includes four complementing links, which include an encyclopedia entry of Alcimadas and three commentaries of his works. More so, Pullman highlights the parts of the excerpt that to him, as one can assume, can stand out to students.

The website has similar sections throughout, although it doesn't itself host many of the actual readings. Rather, it includes mostly commentaries and short excerpts. Given the complexity that classical texts can often have (even in their translated versions), and the background contextual knowledge that is so crucial to the study of rhetoric, Pullman's webtext presents one way where students can both engage with the rhetorical tradition, yet do so with the help of the digital.

The second resource is "*Kairos*", which describes itself, per its website, as an "open-access online journal exploring the intersections of rhetoric, technology, and pedagogy" ("Aristotle's Rhetoric," n.d). There is much that can be written as praise for *Kairos* and its approach to both the academic discourse and issues of social justice. However, in keeping to the topic, what will be looked at is its pedagogical value. Noteworthy lies the fact that amongst its editorial staff lie some of the major scholars involved with work in digital rhetoric, including Douglas Eyman, Cheryl Ball, and Michael Faris.

*Kairos* is unique in many ways, but it is their completely unconventional approach to academic publishing that makes them stand out. All of their publications are webtexts, and they are very strict about their content requirements:

We're not looking for a standard, text-based article written in a word processing program such as Microsoft Word or a similar program. We don't accept traditional print essays. Because the work we publish integrates rhetoric, design, and code to produce a scholarly argument that is instantiated in the use of media and design, we also have fairly specific technical requirements (e.g. we typically don't accept work produced in proprietary formats or systems—like iWeb or Wix). ("Submissions," n.d.)

*Kairos* acknowledges, and indeed embraces the fact that their journal is not included in traditional academic metrics. As they mention, with *Kairos* being a digital-only journal, and given its unconventional approach, it "is not listed in any indices that provide impact factors, as those indices have always favored print-based journals that are neither innovative nor interdisciplinary in their publications".

If one is to go on the *Kairos* website, they will see webtexts embedded with a variety of multimodal resources. The area of focus of *Kairos* is as broad as the field of Rhetoric and Composition itself. Interestingly, *Kairos* does include, in one of the sections on its website called "Stasis", an archived collection. A few of the resources being hosted there actually particularly relate to classical rhetoric, including a hypertextual resource on Aristotle's "Rhetoric" and another webtext of Quintilian's "Institutes of Oratory". Both of these resources have digitalized the entirety of the respective texts and have also subtitled the various topics of discussion that are expounded on within them. Whilst these texts do not include much multimodality, they do provide an example of how these texts might continue to be hosted.

The final resource in question pertains to the audiobook versions of various texts by Plato, narrated by Ray Childs. These texts are not uncommon within the introductory study of rhetoric, and the audiobook format can be thought to be an area for a great opportunity. In further reflection, one can recall that the Platonic texts being mentioned are dialogues. In reading them, the audience must constantly keep this in mind to fully understand what is being played out. The audiobook, then, allows for an opportunity to present dialogues as they are, and give the respective an added dimension to the respective texts. In these narrations, each character has a different voice, and the narrations very much emulate a normal conversation in the changes in tone, pitch, and pattern that the given character in question speaks with.

## 6. Future Directions

All the resources mentioned share one thing in common; that is, they have great pedagogical potential, if not already demonstrations of how this might be the case. All of them show that what is being proposed in this paper is by no means novel. Already, there exist resources that can aid in the teaching of the classical rhetorical tradition in the digital sphere. Pullman's website is the most prominent example of this in practice, and *Kairos* and a medium like an audiobook show how this can be taken even further.

The field of Rhetoric & Composition, once again, is one that is progressive in its nature. Digital rhetoric is a prime example of that, and the pedagogical component associated with it, like for the rest of the discipline, is significant. By incorporating technology within the teaching of fundamental theory within the field, we not only have the potential to achieve the most obvious objective (of informing our students about the great and consequential rhetorical tradition). But, we are also able to look to doing this more effectively, where our students can interact and explore the respective content within an environment that allows for engagement. The make-up of our student bodies is increasingly (if not already) becoming one that has almost exclusively grown up in the digital environment. For them, technology is the norm. And it only is logical that for these students, in our efforts to teach them the principles to engage and thrive in the digital world (that is digital rhetoric), we should also instruct them all the way from the fundamental level in these environments.

This begs one question; how could an integrated example of what is being proposed look like? To present one concept, a study of Aristotelian principles can be presented in a web text format, with excerpts from his text embedded with encyclopedia and dictionary links. Upon hovering over the said text, the student can perhaps view then view a commentary by their respective professor or a link to a video that provides such. Beneath the excerpts, there can be a "Play" button that starts the audiobook recording. On the sidebar, there can be navigation that links customized Google Maps and images of historical places. There can be dedicated sections on the webpage for student discussion. Taking this further, the course assignments could be graded on a peer-review model, where students would upload their work onto the platform (perhaps with the requirement of multimodality) and then comment, discuss, and critique each other's work digitally. This work can be used for the betterment of the website, allowing it to continuously update and expand as semesters go by.

Such an approach could benefit pedagogy within the field in a variety of ways. For one, it would accommodate a variety of learning styles. Secondly, it would allow for students to engage with the context in a way that a traditional printed version simply could not allow for. Finally, it would also be consequential for the preservation of these historical texts, and give a base for more innovative ways of delivering them, particularly within the digital context

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, a case for the digitization of classical rhetorical texts for pedagogical purposes was presented. This was done with the reflection of the state of current related pedagogical resources and in reference to principles of digital rhetoric. In today's world, the traditional means of the dissemination of knowledge have become replaced by advanced digital platforms. This, alongside the context of the global pandemic that has propelled the usage of technological tools in the classroom, has created a conducive environment for innovative pedagogy. Scholarship in the field of Rhetoric and Composition should use to this time to reflect on pedagogy within the discipline that stretches beyond the first-year composition classroom. Whilst this has been done with offering such as Digital rhetoric at the graduate level, it can also be stretched towards grounding coursework. This makes sense for two reasons. Firstly, that an understanding of the digital requires a grounding in fundamental principles, and secondly, that much of the generation of students pursuing graduate education in the discipline have grown up themselves in the digital age. This endeavor is aided by the fact that there already exist various resources, which in tandem, can be transformed into powerful pedagogical tools. In that light, a potential concept for an extension of the present work was put forward.

This study is limited in the sense that it, by no means, outlined the current resources available. Additionally, there is much work that needs to be done in analyzing the effectiveness of the proposed pedagogical changes. Thus, in future work, qualitative studies analyzing the applications of technologically informed teaching in the graduate level Rhetoric and Composition classroom would

be of great benefit. More so, reflections by instructors of Rhetoric similar to this paper would allow for insights and further ideas to be developed.

Ultimately, digitization and technology are the norms of our day and age, and in viewing these elements from a pedagogical perspective, what we see is that there is enormous room for the opportunity not only in teaching the students that will walk through our doors but in preserving the rhetorical tradition that intrigues and fascinates us as the larger community of rhetorical scholarship. It is hoped that this article contributes to furthering a framework for this for the benefit of the field as a whole.

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