
William Keith:

Democracy as Discussion: Civic Education and the American Forum Movement

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William Keith's *Democracy as Discussion: Civic Education and the American Forum Movement* recounts three important and intertwined histories. First, Keith offers an analysis of the development of Speech Communication departments at American Universities in the first half of the twentieth century (departments now home to much rhetorical scholarship in the U.S.). Second, he describes, in great detail, the form and function of the Forum Movement, which furthered public discussion at meeting halls throughout the U.S. in the 1930s. Keith sees the forums as the practical realization of some of the educational goals of Speech Communication departments. These two explicit histories are supplemented by a third, broader, implicit narrative about the relationship between rhetoric and public deliberation as essential parts of democratic life, a narrative that underscores the importance of telling the first two histories. According to Keith, "decisions become both reasonable (in various senses) and democratic depending on the form and substance of the communication that produced them" (p. 2). The development of both Speech Communication departments and the Forum Movement in the U.S. were attempts to make possible and realize a form of discussion as an important mode of participation in public deliberation. By revisiting these attempts to develop public communication as discussion, Keith hopes to contribute to conversations about how best to reinvent participatory democracy in our own historical moment.

The Introduction (pp. 1-18) maps out the general contours of the relationship between democracy and communication and the significance of that relationship for the U.S. deliberative tradition. Right away, Keith demonstrates his belief in the importance of communication by defining democracy as "governance through talk" (p. 2). But what kind of talk, or rhetoric, is best for ensuring that decisions are deliberative? The traditional answer is that face-to-face communication is best. But, according to Keith, the scale of modern democracies makes the realization of face-to-face communication complicated and raises a host of questions about the meaning of discussion, the topics and places appropriate for discussion, and the ways in which people can be taught to talk to one another. To answer these questions requires that we "clarify what constitutes deliberation in a modern democracy", that we define "citizenship", and that we have a plan for how to teach the skills necessary for participation in democratic deliberation (p. 5). The early twentieth century 'discussion movement' attempted to foster a public sphere through face-to-face discourse. Keith's central claim is that proponents of the movement hoped to promote conversation and debate as the modes of communication most suitable to the constitution of a public sphere. Speech Communication departments in the 1930s tried to outline the pedagogical and theoretical importance of discussion while the Forum Movement tried to enact discussion as a mode of participation.

The book is divided into three parts that illustrate three different lessons about the creation and maintenance of a public sphere (each of the three parts are further broken down into three chapters). The first part, "Teaching Speech, Teaching Democracy" (pp. 17-112), is devoted to speech pedagogy and includes Chapter 1, "Origins of Speech Pedagogy" (pp. 19-58), Chapter 2, "Contest Debating and Civic Pedagogy" (pp. 59-88), and Chapter 3, "John Dewey and the Turn to Discussion" (pp. 89-112). The second part, "Teaching Discussion" (pp. 113-210), analyzes discussion pedagogy and includes Chapter 4, "The First Wave: Discussion Education Emerges" (pp. 115-150), Chapter 5, "The Second Wave: Discussion Pedagogy Comes of Age" (pp. 151-192), and Chapter 6, "The Demise of Discussion" (pp. 193-210). The third and last part, "The Forum Movement" (pp. 211-330), tracks the rise and fall of American forums, and includes Chapter 7, "The Development of the American Forum" (pp. 213-240), Chapter 8, "Adult Education and the Civic Mission" (pp. 241-276), and Chapter 9, "The Federal Forum Project" (pp. 277-330). The logic of this organization rests on Keith's belief that to understand the Forum Movement of the 1930s we must understand discussion pedagogy in Speech Communication departments from the 1920s and 1930s, and to understand discussion pedagogy we must understand earlier forms of speech pedagogy from the end of the nineteenth century until the 1920s. Part of the story of the development of the speech discipline, then, includes an analysis of how rhetoric was taught in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries at U.S. universities.

In the eighteenth century, rhetoric was not a subject in the curriculum, but the forms of rhetoric were integrated into the curriculum as a whole. According to Keith, "the purpose of a college education at this point was to produce a virtuous, decent person, capable of serving both in civic duties and in the professions" (p. 23). Nineteenth-century rhetorical education was different. This 'new model' of teaching rhetoric emphasized 'taste' as a goal of education. The move toward aestheticism brought with it an interest in style, in terms of composition, and elocution, in terms of performance. This meant, according to Keith, that rhetoric was taught either as an art of composition (in English departments) or as an art of speaking (by a group of elocutionists). The origins of Speech Communication departments at the beginning of the twentieth century, then, grew out of disciplinary dissatisfaction with English departments, and dissatisfaction with emphases on style and elocution. In crafting a new disciplinary identity speech teachers had to distinguish themselves from composition teachers and other members of English departments by showing that public speaking formed a unified body of material and that instruction in public speaking was best left to a trained and organized department of specialists (faculty trained in literature were not qualified for this task).

The new field of speech communication faced three important issues that shaped its development: first, "What were the powers and responsibilities of communicators in the public setting?"; second, "Is communication a separate area of study? In what way?"; and third, "What sort of scholarship legitimates speech faculty as experts and therefore teachers of communication?" (p. 49). Proponents of competitive debate offered one possible set of answers to these questions, as Keith shows. Contest debating, a uniquely American institution and style of debate, instigated many of the early debates about debate by evoking questions about the role of the debate coach, the benefits and evils of arguing both sides of a case, the question of who would act as a judge, and the civic status of these contests (pp. 67-83). These debates about debate were at the heart of speech teaching in the early field. Some of the criticisms of debate actually led speech teachers in new directions – notably, for Keith, in the direction of discussion (and ultimately public forums) as a better mechanism for developing a civic-minded citizenry with excellent communication skills (pp. 89-91).

In Keith's analysis, one of the central questions that the field of speech communication faced was: "How should we teach democracy?" (p. 91). The problem with contest debate, so some thought, was that it provided inadequate training for real democratic deliberation; discussion was a better model. In order to justify this claim, according to Keith, early discussion proponents relied on the work of John Dewey. Dewey's pragmatism was committed to the belief that human thought and action were social activities, and thus he was interested in "deliberative reasoning, choice-making in problematic situations" (p. 93). By giving priority to group decision-making in problematic situations, both Dewey and the early discussion proponents tried to re-imagine the best features of the town meeting. Keith goes further, describing Dewey's impact on the training of teachers at Columbia University and his direct influence on the speech scholars and teachers who promoted discussion. Dewey even wrote the introduction to a textbook titled *Argumentation and Public Discussion* (p. 104), in which he argued that debate was an insufficient form of reasoning because it was not democratic enough. The discussion movement never displaced debate, so Keith demonstrates, but instead, with intellectual support from Dewey, emerged in response to several controversies surrounding the goal and form of argumentation, the role of competition in the search for truth, and the kinds of people who should be trained by speech teachers. These were the issues that discussion theorists attempted to address in their work.

According to Keith, discussion pedagogy developed in two waves. Chapter 4 outlines the first wave, between 1922-36, which began with Alfred Sheffield's book, *Joining Public Discussion*. Sheffield and Craig Baird were the dominant figures of this 'first wave'. Underpinning their work was the belief that "the practical manifestation of democracy is a co-operative, rather than competitive, group" (p. 125). Thus Sheffield offered practical advice for how best to lead a discussion, and Baird tried to craft a "synthetic view of argument" (p. 135) that supported this commitment to cooperation. Both projects were linked to the progressive politics of the time and visions of adult education and liberal education. In these ways, Sheffield and Baird picked up, and in some places extended, Dewey's claims about democratic life. Chapter 5, then, analyzes the second wave of discussion pedagogy, between 1936-1955, when an important theoretical reversal took place. In the nineteenth century, the assumption was that "democratic institutions were established and fixed, and pedagogy was a matter of training people to take part in them" (p. 152). But discussion proponents, in the light of Dewey's work, began to argue that "the *modes of interaction themselves* are the democracy, and the institutions are democratic only insofar as they embody these modes" (p. 152, italics Keith). From this perspective, "democracy means bringing the people together to deliberate *in the right way*" not "bringing the *right people* together to deliberate" (ibid., italics Keith). According to Keith, this reversal was carried out by two factors: first, speech teachers developed a normative dimension of theories of argumentation, and, second, they incorporated the humanistic tradition of teaching rhetoric into the social scientific dimensions of the field. The early enthusiasm for discussion, so Keith argues, was then transformed into concerns about the integration of discussion into the communication curriculum; the relationship between discussion and argumentation; the form and function of participation; the need for individuals to suspend emotional commitments; the size and scale of the group; and the openness of the group to new claims and dissenting voices (pp. 169-188). These practical problems all came together sharply in connection with the forums.

Keith claims, at the beginning of Chapter 7 that the "public forums were the institutions where Americans were supposed to do their discussion" (p. 213). Sometimes 'forum' referred to the building where people met, sometimes to the people who met at various places, or, more often, to a series of meetings. A group of people attended a forum to listen to a speaker for less than an hour and then had time to ask questions. According to Keith, there were more than 450

local forums in 1937, and the popularity of these forums went “hand in hand with the discussion movement, and it peaked in the 1930s” (p. 213). Carnegie Corporation administrators and Teachers College faculty, both leaders of the adult education movement, were the primary agents working to advance the idea of the forums and worked to bring the mass public forum to reality. The history of adult education in the U.S. is, in many ways, inseparable from the history of the forum movement in the 1930s – Keith recounts the work of figures like Eduard Linderman (pp. 245-50), Lyman Bryson (pp. 250-53), and Harry and Bonaro Overstreet (pp. 253-57) to help explain this deep relationship. However, the most important figure in this context, according to Keith, was John Studebaker, who was able to implement the Federal Forum Project while Commissioner of Education. Studebaker’s vision for the forums was supported by a commitment to creating opportunities for fair, free, and impartial discussion, which he believed was the best means to arrive at good and true claims (all beliefs originally espoused by John Dewey) (p. 268). Keith details the operation of the Federal Forum Project – how the forums worked, who attended, and what the discussion leaders tried to do to facilitate “good discussion” (pp. 298-308). Ultimately, Studebaker’s attempt to create a public space that was both state-sponsored and, at the same time, state-independent, faced continued criticism. This criticism became one of the reasons the “mighty accomplishment” of the forums faded away (p. 319). In Keith’s wonderfully detailed descriptions of places like the Des Moines forum (pp. 282-288) one can see a living, breathing example of the importance for democracy of a specific form of communication, supported by a pedagogical theory.

The purpose of *Democracy as Discussion* is to help rhetorical scholars reflect on the central problems contemporary democracies face. As Keith claims in the conclusion, these problems include the tensions between agonism and cooperation, scale and meaningfulness, education and entertainment. Such oppositions highlight the need to think through what a ‘good’ version of rhetoric might look like, according to rhetorical scholars and the general citizenry, and how rhetoricians should go about teaching and realizing that version of rhetoric. These questions about democratic life have always been important to rhetorical studies. A model of rhetoric built on cooperative discussion would seem to require different notions of pedagogy and different political institutions from the ones we currently inhabit, as Keith shows in his book. Would we prefer such a model of rhetoric and such a model of democracy in our own historical moment? Keith suggests that it might not be a bad idea – the forums may have gotten something right that we have forgotten.

What is noteworthy about Keith’s book is that it traces a forgotten history of the importance of discussion as a form of communication and rhetoric that emphasizes cooperation over agonism. Keith clearly shows how, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a commitment to discussion intersected with U.S. conceptions of democracy. The connection he highlights between discussion, speech, and rhetoric is too often overlooked in contemporary rhetorical theory. The purpose, therefore, of Keith’s study is to offer lessons regarding the ways in which discussion has helped (and how other forms of communication can help) foster public discourse.

Keith’s examination of the field of speech communication and the Forum Movement is an important contribution to the discussion of communication practice in democratic life. Offering an example of Habermas’s ‘public sphere’ theory turned into practice, in a concrete historical setting and supported by an explicit pedagogy, Keith’s study holds the potential of changing the way rhetoricians conceptualize their own status within the modern university and of helping rhetorical theorists rethink the kinds of communicative practices best suited for life in a large-scale, multi-cultural democracy.

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Robert Danisch holds a Ph.D. in Communication Studies and is Assistant Professor in the General Studies Unit at Concordia University. He recently published *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 2007) and is interested in the intersection between rhetorical theory, pragmatist philosophy, and democratic life.

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