

Knowledge and Belief

THE ROLE OF RHETORIC



From Plato's *Gorgias*

Socrates: Shall we then assume two sorts of persuasion,-one which is the source of belief without knowledge, as the other is of knowledge?

Gorgias: By all means.

Socrates: And which sort of persuasion does rhetoric create in courts of law and other assemblies about the just and unjust, the sort of persuasion which gives belief without knowledge, or that which gives knowledge?

Gorgias: Clearly, Socrates, that which only gives belief.

From Plato's *Gorgias*

Socrates: Then rhetoric, as would appear, is the artificer of a persuasion which creates belief about the just and unjust, but gives no instruction about them?

Gorgias: True.

Socrates: And the rhetorician does not instruct the courts of law or other assemblies about things just and unjust, but he creates belief about them; for no one can be supposed to instruct such a vast multitude about such high matters in a short time?

Gorgias: Certainly not.

From the “Encomium of Helen”

“Those who have persuaded and do persuade anyone about anything are shapers of lying discourse. For if all people possessed memory concerning all things past, and awareness of all things present, and foreknowledge of all things to come, discourse would not be similarly similar; hence it is not now easy to remember the past or consider the present or foretell the future; so that most people on most subjects furnish themselves with opinion as advisor to the soul. But opinion, being slippery and unsteady, surrounds those who rely on it with slippery and unsteady successes.”

A Paraphrase

All persuasive speakers are liars. If we remembered everything that had happened in the past, knew and understood everything about the present, and had foreknowledge of the future, this would not necessarily be so. However, because it is impossible to know everything about the past, present and future, we rely on opinion to make decisions, and opinion is necessarily unreliable.

In a Nutshell

Because we are human, we can never know the whole truth, so we do the best we can with what most people think to be true.

Aristotle's Definition

“Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic. Both are concerned with such things as come, more or less, within the general ken of all men and belong to no definite science” (*Rhetoric*, 179).

Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (*Rhetoric*, 181).

Considering the Role of Rhetoric

“The duty of rhetoric is to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon without arts or systems to guide us, in the hearing of persons who cannot take in at a glance a complicated argument, or follow a long chain of reasoning” (Book 1, Part 2).

The Role of Rhetoric

From this perspective, rhetoric has two main functions:

1. Rhetoric is useful when we don't have certain knowledge, but we still feel that we must do something.
2. Rhetoric is also useful in cases where we have certain knowledge, but the meaning of the knowledge has to be explained to the audience to make it persuasive.

Learning Goals

Students will be able to:

- Make distinctions between certain knowledge, belief, and opinion
- Understand the role of rhetoric in matters where we do not have certain knowledge
- Assess the effectiveness of different rhetorical appeals in different situations
- Surface assumptions in their own thinking and in that of others
- Write a list of rhetorically effective “talking points” regarding a specific issue or problem that demonstrates their understanding of the previous outcomes

Workshop Plan

- Explore initial activities
- Introduce “Who wrote Shakespeare?” issue and briefly go over the interview and the two cheat sheets (10 minutes)
- Participants fill out Knowledge/Belief grid. (20 minutes)
- Participants share grids in groups of three or four.
 - First phase, note differences. (10 minutes)
 - Second phase, track down assumptions different members made that might explain the different points of view. (10 minutes)
- Briefly note “Appeal Effectiveness” activity. (5 minutes)
- Explore the “Talking Points” assignment. (10 minutes)

Activity 1: A Mistaken Belief

Have you ever believed something to be true, only to find out later that it wasn't?

Answer the following questions:

- What was the belief that turned out not to be true?
- Why did you believe it was true?
- How did you find out that it wasn't? What convinced you?

Share your answers with a partner. Discuss what you learned from your experience. What advice would you give others, based on your experience?

Activity 2: Knowledge versus Belief

- What is the difference between “knowledge” and “belief”?
- Is “proving” different from “persuading”?
- What is the difference between what is certain and what is probable? If, as in a courtroom, the jury decides that something has been proved “beyond a reasonable doubt,” does that mean that it is certainly true or merely highly probable?
- Are we persuaded only by what is certain or sometimes by what is probable, in that it is likely to be true, or that most people would agree that it is true?

Activity 3: Exploring Key Concepts

- Persuasion—Using words or actions to encourage someone to believe or do something
- Knowledge—Knowing with certainty that something is true
- Belief—Accepting with confidence or faith that something is true, with or without evidence
- Opinion—A view not necessarily based on fact or evidence
- Probability—The likelihood that something is true based on experience

Think about how we make decisions in our daily lives. Which concept is the most common basis for our decisions? Which concept is the least common basis? Using “1” for most common and “5” for least common, rank the five concepts. Then share your rankings with a partner to see if you agree. Discuss any differences.

Activity 4: Choosing an Issue

This mini-module is designed so that any controversial issue could be plugged into it. The teacher could assign one or the students could find their own. For our workshop today, I have chosen to explore the question of the authorship of the Shakespearean plays.

Our core text will be “Was Shakespeare a Woman?” by Elizabeth Winkler, published in the June 2019 issue of *The Atlantic*. Although this article suggests that the plays were written by Emilia Bassano, there are links to other pieces that argue for a variety of authors, including William Shakespeare of Stratford on Avon.

This article and other texts related to this workshop are available on my blog at <https://textrhet.com/knowledge-and-belief-presentation/>

The Materials

Because our time is limited in the workshop/demonstration, I have prepared descriptive outlines with summaries and pull quotes for several of the sources. If you have a capable device, you can click on the full articles and skim them on the blog site.

However, it doesn't really matter if you have read the articles in detail or not. Our focus is on what you think you know, how you know it, what you believe, and why you believe it. A second question will be "Why do members of our group know and believe different things?"

Activity 5: Applying the Concepts

What I know for certain	How do I know it?
What I believe	Why do I believe it?
What is probable	Why do I think so?
In my opinion, they should . . .	On what do you base your opinion?

Activity 5 Continued

After filling out your chart, share it with your partner to see if you had similar ideas and came to similar conclusions. You will probably find that when you came to different conclusions, it is because you made different assumptions.

Sources of Assumptions

- The reputations of people, organizations, and news sources
- Identification of particular people as being like us, or unlike us
- Past experiences with related things
- Emotional reactions
- Images and loaded words
- Logic or common sense
- Probability
- Trust or lack of trust in authority
- Political or religious affiliation
- An optimistic or pessimistic outlook
- Prior knowledge related to the issue or event

Activity 6: Clarifying Assumptions

Partner A	Partner B
Assumed news source A was more reliable	Assumed new source B was more reliable
Assumed that person C was telling the truth	Assumed that Person C was lying, and person D was telling the truth
Trusts the police	Doesn't trust the police
Knew more about how a factor in the event really works	Didn't know much about that factor
Has no relevant experience	Has relevant experience

Charting the Assumptions

Using the chart in the last slide as an example, make a list of the assumptions you made when filling the chart in Activity 4. The column on the right in the previous chart, starting with “How I know it,” will give you some clues. After you have made your list, fill out the chart below with your partner. (If you are in a group, you might make your own chart with more columns.)

Charting Your Assumptions: Results

Discuss the T-chart you produced. Then answer the following question in a short paragraph:

How did writing down your knowledge, beliefs, opinions, and assumptions about a specific issue or event and sharing them with a partner affect your understanding of your own thinking processes and the thinking processes of your partner?

You might also think about these questions: Do you think that more sharing of this kind would help our society get along better? Would it be beneficial to our society if we could at least get to the point where we can say, “I still don’t agree with you, but I understand why you think that way”? Why or why not?

Activity 7: Which Appeal is More Effective?

Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Establish that I am knowledgeable about music	I play trumpet in the school band.	
Pathos	This song has positive effects on the listener's mood.	When I feel lonely, this song cheers me up more than any other.	
Logos	Establish the expertise of the musicians.	The lead singer went to Julliard (a famous music school).	

Activity 8: Arguing about Homelessness

Position: More Homeless Shelters			
Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Build credibility with constituents	I have lived in this community all my life. I care about all its citizens.	
Pathos	Characterize homeless people and why they are homeless	People are homeless for many reasons. The loss of a job, an unexpected medical bill, or the onset of mental illness can make whole families suddenly homeless.	
Logos	Show that my solution will be effective	Shelters get people off the street and can provide services that will help them get back on their feet and become productive members of society. Enforcing laws against sleeping on the street will just make them go elsewhere for a while.	

Activity 8: The Other Position

Position: Enforce Laws Against Sleeping in Public Places			
Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Build credibility with constituents	I have operated businesses in this community for more than 20 years.	
Pathos	Characterize homeless people and why they are homeless	Homeless people are a blight on our community. Employment is at an all time high. There are many jobs. Many people choose to be homeless because they are too lazy to work, so they beg.	
Logos	Show that my solution will be effective	Cities that enforce laws against public sleeping have a reduced homeless population. It's a fact!	

Activity 10: Talking Points

Talking points should have the following:

- A clear purpose. What are we trying to accomplish?
- Arguments that support that purpose, expressed in clear language, short and simple enough to memorize. These arguments should address all three appeals: ethos, pathos, logos. (Just like you have been doing in the charts above.)
- Anecdotes (personal stories) that people can relate to that support the arguments are very useful. Keep them brief, however!
- Points of common ground that both sides can agree on.
- A proposed call to action.