Classical Rhetoric and the Political Tweet

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We teach in an undergraduate engineering-focused institution. Our mission is to provide a liberal education to engineers and scientists in training. While it is beneficial to have some assignments in our HSS (Humanities and Social Sciences) classes directly tied to engineering interests (for example, a literature review on one of the National Academy of Engineering Grand Challenges), we believe it's also important to provide elements of the type of liberal education they might encounter at universities and liberal arts colleges. One central element of that liberal education is rhetoric, and we (the authors) don't shy away from teaching it, and even applying it to political matters. This paper will describe the basic rhetorical framework we share with our students and discuss how Twitter provides a varied, ever-changing, and concise platform to engage students in the forms and uses of rhetoric. We encourage our ASEE colleagues, including scientists and engineers, to apply bits of it they find appealing to their own teaching.

Our understanding of rhetorical situations and how to analyze them is underpinned by the rhetorical triangle, derived from the work of Lloyd Bitzer [1].
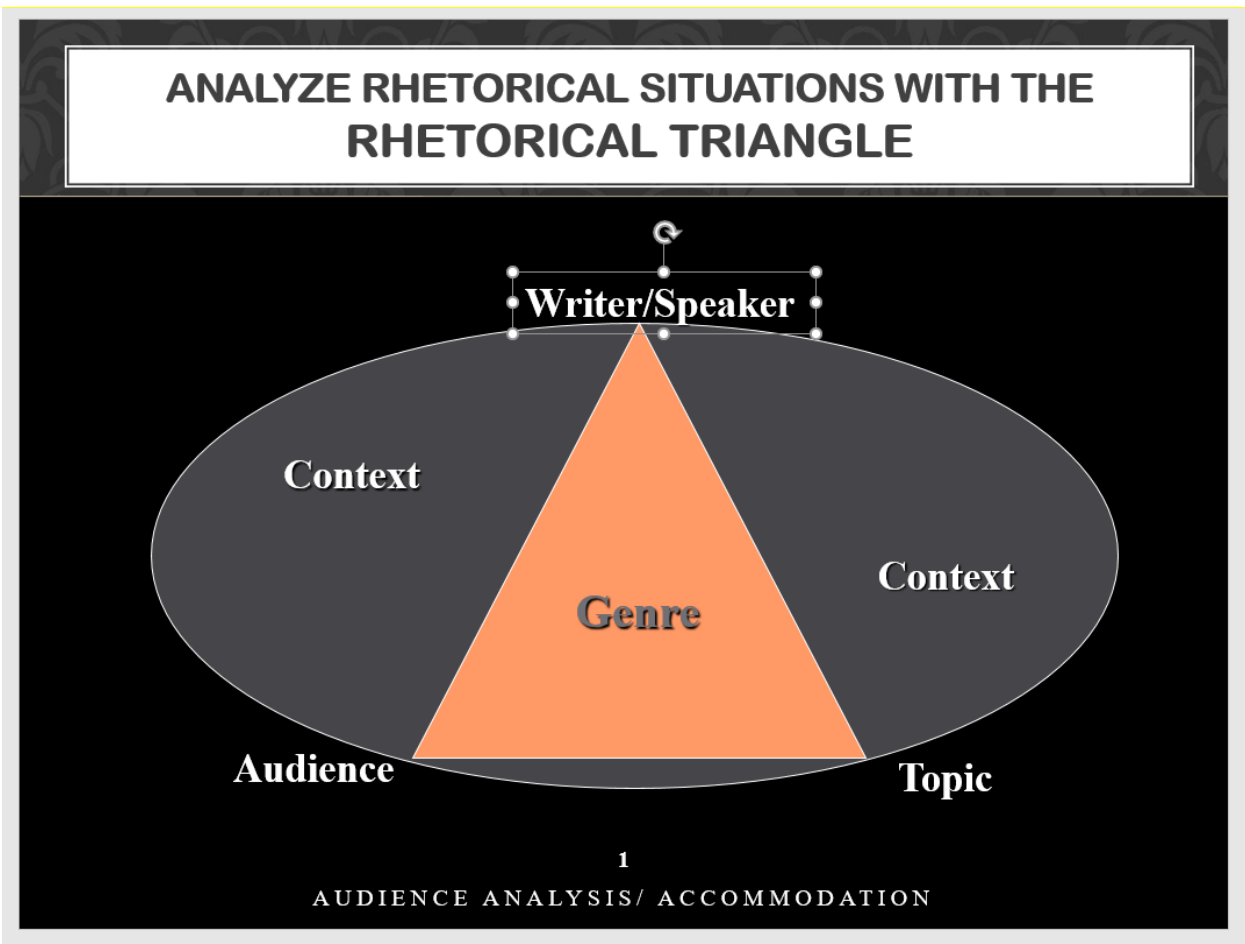
We share the triangle graphic shown above (usually just sketched on the board), explaining that every communication situation (whether a lab report or a memo or progress report or journal article) shares these elements: there is one or more speakers or writers, talking to one or more particular audiences, about a given topic, in a genre, and against a wider context. Genres, in this modern sense, refer to recurring types of communication with certain conventions, such as those named in the list above ("lab report"). Another associated term we introduce while teaching the triangle is "exigence"—the reason why the topic should matter to the audience—the answer to the "so what?" question.

We also, however, reach further back in time to Aristotle [2] and then more recently Perelman [3] to teach our students about the classical modes (not to be confused with modern genres). Recognizing the modern genre that one is reading or writing is useful, for example, in order to see which of the usual conventions of that genre are being followed or broken, and with what effect. Recognizing the classical modes is most useful, we think, for understanding the purpose behind the communication. The three classical modes are forensic, deliberative, and epideictic rhetoric. The purpose of forensic rhetoric is to judge past action, or praise or blame an individual or the qualities of an object: for example, "This is a great hat" is forensic rhetoric. The purpose of deliberative rhetoric is to suggest or determine future action: for example, "I should get this hat autographed because it will be worth more if I ever want to resell it" is deliberative rhetoric. The purpose of epideictic rhetoric is to celebrate common values and make a community more cohesive; for example, "The images and slogan silk-screened on this hat evoke positive associations for the members of the community wearing it." All three of these observations about the hat (based on classical modes) could be made within the contemporary genre of verbal rhetorical analysis.

One more set of concepts stemming from classical rhetoric that we employ is the appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos refers to the credibility of the speaker or writer, either preexisting credentials or as established by the nature of the communication itself. Pathos refers to the appeal to emotions and values held by the audience; as one might guess, pathos is a prominent appeal in epideictic rhetoric, but can be used within any mode or genre of rhetoric. Logos refers to logical evidence and reasoning. We teach students that most communication acts contain some mixture of these three appeals.

Let's take a recent issue of ASEE's *Prism* magazine as an example. In the Oct. 2017 issue (that's part of the context), we find an editorial (genre) written by Mark Matthews (author), the magazine editor. It follows the conventions of the editorial genre, including by being short andoffering a personal opinion. It appeals to logos and engages in forensic rhetoric with the following statement, which also reveals the topic of the piece: "American health-care costs are growing more slowly than in the early 2000s, but we still spend twice as much a person--and a much bigger chunk of our gross national product—than other major industrialized countries" [4, p.06]. The editorial goes on to raise the deliberative question of whether "a monthly publication can never expect to stay on top of the news," such as changing trends and technologies in health care, but proceeds to epideicticly celebrate that "this issue, with three stories on medicine and health care, comes pretty close" [4, p.06]. Besides celebrating the articles on healthcare, Matthews also highlights the pathos appeal to the readers' emotions by deliberatively recommending we "don't miss Mary Lord's delightful teaching toolbox feature on how candy can stimulate learning and enliven the engineering classroom"[4, p. 6]—something we all want to do!

Bringing in a copy of ASEE *Prism* for rhetorical analysis has fairly obvious applications for engineering students. However, we argue that subjects for rhetorical analysis need not be directly connected to engineering, given our mission of providing a liberal education for our students. Thus, we have looked to social media and politics to provide fodder for rhetorical analysis. In a prior paper, we provided a rhetorical analysis of Donald Trump's twitter feed during three time periods: while he was campaigning for the primary nomination, after he received it and was President-elect, and once he became president [5].

Using short examples of rhetorical devices can foreground classical rhetoric used in public ways in an attempt to influence policy. Throughout their career at Rose-Hulman (and later during their careers as engineers, scientists, and mathematicians), students serve on numerous teams proposing solutions to problems. As part of their analysis, they must also use the same lessons on a larger scale. What change will this project effect? What audiences are you addressing and what attitudes, biases, and knowledge do they start with? How will this communication live in the world? How do you establish your ethos? What appeals to pathos and logos will be most effective for your audience? What context exists for this work? What conversation or on-going research does this report enter? While the most popular tweets can be researched usually by a quick Google search, their larger projects require scaling up this process of analysis and interpretation. Twitter allows concrete practice in short bursts.

Twitter provides fertile ground for rhetorical analysis in a format students know. News, public policy, advocacy, and popular culture coexist and sometimes meld, as we have seen for example with the #MeToo movement. Twitter began in 2009, and as of the third quarter 2017, Twitter had over 330 million users, with 100 million users daily, sending 500 million tweets a day. (6) Originally, Tweets were limited to 140 characters, but Twitter expanded that to 280 for most languages. Twitter differs from other social media platforms due to its "asymmetric" relationship While Facebook and Instagram create reciprocal relationships (I'll friend you, and you friend me), Twitter users can maintain one-way relationships. At one point in time, Katy Perry followed 147 people and had 27 million followers [7]. Twitter's use in the public sphere has been followed by research on its uses, from studies on twitter and politics, its effects on the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, and its ability (or not) to predict election outcomes.

Since Twitter also catalogs and tracks tweets, we know the Most Retweeted and the Most Liked tweet in any given year [8]. We could ask students to analyze the rhetorical situation and appeals of these tweets that had the most public life. In 2017, Barack Obama sent the Most Liked and second Most Retweeted, following the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, VA:

Barack Obama ✔
@BarackObama

Following ⌄

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion..."

5:06 PM - 12 Aug 2017

1,718,824 Retweets **4,604,681** Likes

💬 71K   🔁 1.7M   ♡ 4.6M   ✉

The context is clear and easily researchable: an event that turned violent. Here the ethos of the Ex-President with his 99.6 million followers (as of 2/3/18) combines with the appeal to emotions (children) and logic ("No one is born. . .) to create an epideictic tweet calling on shared values. Obama was kept from the 2017 Most Retweeted prize by the post that has gone on to become the highest of all time, retweeted 3.6 million times when the 2017 list came out:

This example has no complicated context--it's purely mercenary, a young man looking for some free fast food. As we can see, Twitter has many types of contexts and purposes. [8]

Among the other Most Tweeted, we find the forensic mode—LeBron James' reply to President Trump following the rescinding of his team's invitation to visit the White House ("U bum @StephenCurry30 already said he ain't going! So therefore ain't no invite.Going to White House was a great honor until you showed up!" 9/23/17), the deliberative mode-- Penn State's Interfraternity Council on the floods in Houston ("With the current devastation in Houston, we are pledging $0.15 for every RT this gets! Please forward this along to help out those in need!"8/30/17), and the epideictic—Obama's on leaving the White House ("It's been the honor

of my life to serve you. You made me a better leader and a better man." 1/2017). The most woefully uninformed could google the dates of these tweets and find the contexts: Stephen Curry announcing he wouldn't accept the President's invitation, the Houston Hurricane damage, and Inauguration Day.

To look at sites presenting different messages on public policy concerns--and to follow our earlier analysis of Trump's twitter feed with a slightly more broad lens into political discourse-- we looked at the main Twitter sites of the national Democratic and Republican parties. Both maintain active Twitter pages (with the DNC much more active after January 1, 2018). The homepages denote the ins and outs of power as the Democrats provide a deliberative message and the Republicans an epideictic one:

For both parties,, what could simply be a decorative background becomes messaging, with Democrats sending a call to create change in the future, and the Republicans presenting themselves as a united front leading a united nation--exactly what an administration would want to portray.

Both parties displayed all three forms of messaging: deliberative (Democrats "Organize, Mobilize, Win" 1/2/18), (Republicans "It only takes one choice to make a big change. Make your first move by joining your local community for the National Day of Training on January 20th." 1/2/18.), forensic (Democrats "Every day Republicans refuse to bring the DREAM Act to a vote, 122 DREAMers lose their protected status. We need a #DREAMActNow. 1/3/18, "Republicans "The Democrat 2020 hopefuls on protests in Iran: *crickets*" 1/2/18) and epideictic (Democrats "2 new Democrats are joining the Senate today. We're ready to make that number a lot higher in 2018." 2/3/18. Republicans "2018 is already off to a strong start." 1/2/18, linked to a Fox News story about the stock market).

One interesting way to compare the rhetorics of the GOP and DNC Twitter sites is to pick a particular moment in time and see what each site posts on that date. We chose two examples of highly-covered news stories to see how each responds. One such span of time occured in early December 2017, as the Roy Moore vs. Doug Jones election concluded. Interestingly, though, neither site was saying anything about it from Dec. 1-12, the period immediately prior to the special election for the Alabama senate seat. The absence of tweets voicing support for Roy Moore even on the @GOP Twitter site might be explained by the context, that Moore was being accused of pedophelia and had become a rather toxic topic. The GOP never fully withdrew their support of him and continued to fund his campaign. Despite their efforts to avoid raising the topic on their Twitter site, a search for "@GOP and Roy Moore" on Twitter reveals that plenty of tweeters were still offering condemnation of the party and its leadership for the support they did provide. On Dec. 13th, as it became obvious the Democrat Doug Jones would win the election, the DNC site broke its silence, launching the only string close to a tweet storm for the month of December.

Two of the four tweets the DNC posted on Dec. 13 linked to this same Politico photo, headline, and story. The characterization that the "DNC waged stealth organizing campaign for Jones" points to an explanation of why the DNC site did not display any support (indeed, did not even mention) Jones until the very close election was won: their strategy was to be "stealth"y, as making their activist and financial backing of Jones too apparent might well have backfired with

Alabama voters. The main body of both the tweet and the photo headline we've quoted are literally forensic in nature, favorably judging the actions of the DNC. However, we would argue that the broader purpose and effect of the Dec. 13 tweets is epideictic, celebrating the achievements of their warriors as they return from battle. Notably, the GOP maintained its silence on the election, choosing to say nothing about their controversial candidate's defeat on Dec. 13.

During the government shutdown in January, 2018, both parties took to Twitter multiple times with variations of the same message, captured in the opposing hashtags #TrumpShutdown and #SchumerShutdown. As the shutdown neared, Democrats squarely laid blame at the feet of the Republicans, "Republicans control the House, Senate, and White House, and still can't manage to lead. If they wanted the government to stay open, it would stay open — instead, they're opting for a #TrumpShutdown." 1/19/2018. And on the other side: "Day 2 of #SchumerShutdown and Democrats continue to choose political games above: Veterans' services, Opioid treatment centers, Health care for 9 million vulnerable children" 1/21/18. Both retweet articles bolstering their side, attaching news articles, television segments, and state party tweets. Few tweets argue for their position, instead relying on forensic judgements about the motives and tactics of the other side.

Since Twitter is also a visual medium, both sides also repeatedly showed the faces of the hashtags:

The Democrats ✔ @TheDemocrats · Jan 20

January 20, 2017: Donald Trump takes office.

January 20, 2018: Government shuts down.

#TrumpShutdown

On The One-Year Anniversary Of Trump's Inauguration, The Governm...
"We will no longer accept politicians who are all talk and no action," he proclaimed at his inauguration.
huffingtonpost.com

💬 350   🔁 1.1K   ♡ 2.2K   ✉

In the larger context of this situation, the two parties don't hold the Twitter field to themselves, only playing one part in a wider and very active political debate. Individual senators, representatives, state organizations, and advocacy groups also weigh in. And, of course, the President. In one rather dizzying example, the Democrats retweeted Senator Mark Warner's tweet in which he retweeted the President's tweet.

The Democrats Retweeted

Mark Warner ✔ @MarkWarner · Jan 19

This is not leadership. With under 24 hours on the clock, the President's repeated statements urging a government shutdown are only making the dysfunction worse.

> **Donald J. Trump** ✔ @realDonaldTrump
>
> Government Funding Bill past last night in the House of Representatives. Now Democrats are needed if it is to pass in the Senate - but they want illegal immigration and weak borders. Shutdown coming? We need more Republican victories in 2018!

💬 324   🔁 926   ♡ 2.7K   ✉

The dynamic, real-time environment of the medium lets us see how arguments change from day to day and incident to incident.

For a good test of this, we encourage people to pick a random day, or the current day, or an event in the news, and compare what the two parties tweet that day—or pick two other entities in dialogue, such as Fox News and MSNBC, or two advocacy groups on different sides. In terms of strategy for the classroom, the length of tweets and the changing environments allow students to track changes over time in longer assignments or practice with short sessions in the classroom. By taking a medium they know, that has a real life and consequences in the world, students can see how our rhetorical practices shape a message, an argument, and the world we live in.

References

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