

Provocations of Virtue: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing

John Duffy

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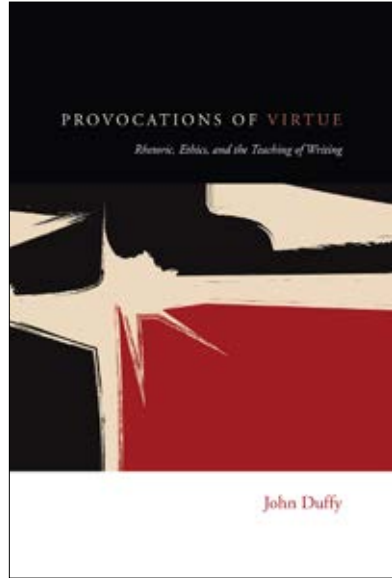
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The proliferation of post-truth discourse and the dissemination of alternative facts have permeated public rhetoric, both in the past and in the present. The democratic nature of digital platforms like YouTube, Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enables and sustains what John Duffy deems “toxic rhetoric.” From manufactured claims about the dangers of measles vaccinations to the vile and dangerous hoax theories discrediting the Sandy Hook massacre, one does not have to look very far to encounter the twisted and often depraved ways toxic rhetoric continues to haunt public rhetoric. More than ever before, social media companies are being called upon by governing bodies and members of the public to remain accountable for the role of digital platforms in circulating misinformation and promoting discourse that spreads hate.

We are only now beginning to see the implementation of emerging measures to keep toxic rhetoric in check across social media platforms. In 2018, YouTube banned Alex Jones for his role in perpetrating conspiracy theories that denied the reality of the Sandy Hook massacre (Darcy) and, most recently, YouTube announced plans to demonetize videos that promote anti-vaccination propaganda (Belluz). In 2019, other platforms set in motion new policies to discourage the spread of abusive discourse. For example, *NPR*'s Bobby Allyn reports that Reddit flagged The Donald subreddit due to an increase in violent threats that were launched against policymakers in Oregon after republican legislatures were on the run to avoid a vote on statewide climate change measures (Allyn; Irfan). *The New York Times* reporter Kate Conger weighed in on Twitter's recently announced rules to flag political leaders' tweets considered to be in violation of the platform's policies on “harassment and violent threats” (Conger). Toxic rhetoric, it seems, is pervasive in everyday discourse.

But what does toxic rhetoric have to do with the study and practice of writing and rhetoric? This question is central to John Duffy's *Provocations of Virtue*. The book is a timely response to our current historical moment, as the social and political ter-



rain remains altogether polarized, fragmented, and broken. To find common ground with those with whom we disagree requires an ethical attunement that can be learned and honed, according to Duffy, in the first-year writing and rhetoric classroom. As noted above, the methods of argumentation are often exploited for unsavory purposes and are repeatedly put to work to advance anti-scientific agendas or destructive conspiracy theories. If we seek a more ethical public discourse, Duffy advises that we begin by reimagining the role of first-year research practices, instructors, and programs, in the promotion of a more fair, ethical, and just public rhetoric in the future.

Duffy's book is itself a performance of the practice of virtue ethics, offering a balanced and robust pedagogical roadmap for designing ambitious writing and rhetoric courses that use quotidian public discourse as a platform for students and teachers to inquire into the contingent and situated nature of rhetorical ethics. Just as there are no prescriptive methods for making ethical choices, there are no hard and fast rules to be found in Duffy's manuscript for the teaching of ethics in the writing classroom; instead, he offers a theoretical framework to be adapted and augmented for each particular class, student population, writing program, and institution. Certainly, Duffy's case for a rhetorical approach to virtue ethics holds implications for how compositionists and rhetoricians articulate its place and value in promoting ethical citizenship in higher education. Beyond academia, Duffy's insights on toxic rhetoric and virtue ethics offers a vital intervention to help readers imagine a more humane and ethical public discourse that is advanced through empathy, respect, humility, honesty, trust, and intellectual courage.

To begin, chapter one offers a definitional argument about the contours of 'toxic rhetoric' and also describes the cause and effect relations that mobilize toxic discourse in public life. According to Duffy, incivility, hate speech, eliminationist rhetoric, venomous speech, and outrage discourse are the hallmarks of the toxic discourse we have come to recognize in society (25–29). Such expressions are toxic, he suggests, because they do harm to others by way of dishonesty, unaccountability, demonization, violence, denial, and poverty of spirit (30–32). To illustrate these vices, the chapter points readers to current events and historical examples from everyday life—campaign advertisements, presidential campaigns, cable news, as well as the divisive response to pressing issues like the Syrian refugee crisis, climate change, and white supremacy. Teachers of writing, rhetoric, and community-engaged work will find the chapter rich in evidence that can be taken to the classroom to prompt student-instructor inquiry about how rhetors might respond ethically to these everyday discourses.

Even more, Duffy illuminates how the "democratization of the media space" has worked to intensify and distribute "outrageous discourse" and, as a result, offers all the more reason to equip writing students to ethically engage and respond to discourse both within and beyond the classroom (37). It is worth acknowledging that Duffy advances a similar argument in his previously published essay "Post-Truth and First Year Writing." Here, he praises the ambitions of the FYC course and its potential for teaching students to engage in intellectual humility to identify and establish com-

mon ground. *Provocations of Virtue* moves this claim forward by focusing on how and why writing teachers might begin to do so.

In the second chapter, Duffy maps out a brief overview of theoretical orientations to ethics by pointing readers to western philosophical traditions, spanning deontology, consequentialism, and postmodernism. The chapter begins with three vignettes highlighting the risks that come with teaching writing and rhetoric. When faced with writing about hotly contested issues, he explains that students are faced with risky ethical choices about making and supporting claims, selecting proofs, acknowledging counterclaims, and so on. “To write is to make choices,” Duffy explains, “and to teach writing is to teach rationales for making such choices” (44). Many disciplinary articles, conference papers, and books certainly acknowledge the deep and historical connection between rhetorical ethics and the teaching of writing, and Duffy affirms this ethical charge by suggesting that composition pedagogy too, is always cast as a facilitator of ethical education. This capacity is not a role where one might simply opt in or choose to accept. Instead, the teacher of writing is already inescapably bound by this ethical responsibility.

Ethical orientations have a way of showing up in pedagogical practices, and Duffy is careful to illuminate how this is so by pointing to disciplinary and instructional commitments in composition pedagogy. Current traditional rhetoric, he argues, is rooted in deontological ethics, assuming a pre-existing or absolute rule or standard by which writing can be judged; such a framework emphasizes that “good” writers abide by correct usage and standardization. In contrast, consequentialism weighs ethical outcomes (52). Each time we assess and respond to student writing, we invite students to think about the outcomes of their rhetorical choices about audience, purpose, style, argument, and so on (54). Such an ethic escapes the grasp of hard and fast rules. Finally, postmodern orientations to ethics dwells within flux, contingency, uncertainty, and situational context (57). The good writer is one who is attuned to the shifting ethical terrain and is responsive to the particularities of each given rhetorical situation. Though he acknowledges how these three orientations have left their mark on writing instruction and disciplinary values, Duffy seeks to move beyond these three frameworks and proposes, instead, an alternative framework in the following chapter: virtue ethics (62).

Chapter three outlines a rhetorical framework for what Duffy terms virtue ethics. To set up this alternative ethical theory, Duffy points to Aristotelian virtue ethics, sentimentalist virtue ethics, feminist virtue ethics, non-western virtue ethics, and applied virtue ethics. By considering a breadth of ethical frameworks, he poses the question: “What do we mean by virtue ethics?” (93). Even more, *whose* virtues are we embracing (97)? This question is especially important as our classrooms are inflected with disparate global influences and varied multicultural value systems, yet our disciplinary understanding of ethics is often informed exclusively by western philosophies. Readers will find the overview of each philosophy of ethics described above to be both accessible and insightful; however, the scope of the chapter covers so much ground at the risk of, perhaps, glossing over key differences.

The third chapter also acknowledges the inherent baggage that underpins the concept of virtue and grapples with how the ideal has been deployed to silence those whose behaviors, bodies, and language practices have otherwise disrupted the status quo (63–64; 78; 93). In the name of civility, Duffy observes how calls for virtue have not always led to ethical action. Despite this past trajectory, his alternative approach reclaims virtue ethics and gives place for what he calls “communities of resistance” who practice the “virtues of anger at injustice, of solidarity with the poor, of endurance in the face of loss. . .” (93). Rather than shutting down what those in power might deem disagreeable, impolite, or uncivil discourse, Duffy’s virtue ethics gives place to just and righteous discord that can prompt ethical action.

The book’s fourth chapter revisits commonplace pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing and argumentation and suggests such lessons are key to practicing virtue ethics. The often required first-year writing and rhetoric course adheres to larger disciplinary outcomes that position the curriculum as an opportunity for students to learn to craft original claims, support arguments with credible research, identify and engage multiple perspectives, as well as to collaborate with peers to refine and improve arguments (98). While these practices might be considered business as usual in many standard introductory composition courses in U.S. higher education, Duffy suggests more is at work. These practices are at the heart of an inquiry-driven pedagogy of virtue ethics. When we task students with remaining accountable for their claims, to consider the possibility of being wrong, to formulate an informed judgment, and to reason with peers to find common ground, what we are teaching is nothing short of rhetorical ethics—a capacity that he suggests may reinvigorate public rhetoric in the post-truth era (103).

Chapter four “Rhetorical Virtues” is indebted to Duffy’s 2012 essay published in *Inside Higher Education*. In his previously published essay, Duffy advances the claim that the first-year composition classroom is a valuable space for teaching students to remain accountable for the claims they craft, to generously weigh and consider the viewpoints of others, to suspend certainty to humbly acknowledge the possibility of being wrong, and to listen with care to “practice the virtues of tolerance and generosity. Building from this premise, Duffy’s latest manuscript provides teachers of writing with a roadmap of ethical frameworks to advance pedagogical practices in rhetoric and writing studies that enable students to detect and respond to toxic rhetoric.

The fifth chapter concludes by inviting writing instructors to both teach and model rhetorical virtues in the classroom. The writing classroom is often a place where hotly contested issues are brought to the forefront. It is often the case that, as educators, we come to learn and understand our students’ views that are not necessarily our own. Tolerance is an act of intellectual courage and humility that holds important implications for how teachers navigate and respond to toxic rhetoric in the classroom. Rather than shutting down controversy in the pursuit of reaching consensus, Duffy reminds us that “dissensus speaks to continuing conversation, ongoing negotiation, and, perhaps, evolving points of view over time. Finally, dissensus makes clear that ethical discourse can thrive in conditions of agreement and disagreement, harmony and dissonance, unity and division. The virtuous writer operates in all such

contexts” (133). In opening up our classrooms to controversy and debate, we become participants in the practice of rhetorical virtue and simultaneously allow ourselves to be transformed alongside our students (126).

In all, one of the great achievements of *Provocations of Virtue* is Duffy’s examples derived from everyday life that illuminate how toxic rhetoric continues to permeate and constitute publics. On a textual level, the prose is accessible and the examples chosen are timely. Such examples may be especially useful to teachers of writing and rhetoric who aim to cultivate courses with the objective of teaching a rhetorical approach to ethical communication. Administrators, too, will find Duffy’s insightful commentary valuable for also reflecting on how university writing programs might integrate ethical education into the first-year composition and community-based curriculum. Beyond academia, this book is an ambitious and vital contribution to public discourse and critical thought, as Duffy offers a pathway forward for reinvigorating public engagement and critical media literacy in a post-truth era.

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