The afterlife and recovery of logos, ēthos, and pathos on K-12 education

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Abstract

We will examine how digital communication affects children from three major perspectives: (a) the research and arguments lauding and criticizing how social media and other Internet-based speech influences emotional, intellectual, and moral development, (b) how we might use Aristotle's distinction between *logos*, *ēthos*, and *pathos* (that is, between reason, character, and emotion) in rhetoric to understand what is going wrong and what can be done about it, and (c) how specific classroom and school community practices can prepare young people to navigate the dangers of social media and Internet-based speech.

Introduction

In this paper, we will explore what Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* (2019) may contribute to our understanding of how to cultivate and practice cyber-phronesis. Taking our cues from the Jubilee Centre's neo-Aristotelian framework, we understand cyber-phronesis as the exercise of wisdom and moral virtue online (Harrison & Polizzi, 2021). If the Internet were morally neutral or overwhelmingly beneficial, perhaps cyber-phronesis would be unnecessary. As it stands, key players claim that it is virtually impossible to consistently or thoroughly address abuses (Marantz, 2020). These abuses can come in many forms, from addictive games to privacy violations, but where children are most at risk often concerns trolling, cyber-bullying, and grooming, that is, at those times when we're talking to each other, through tweets, Instagram posts, and Discord chats, among others.

The art of rhetoric concerns how we communicate with each other, but is it relevant to cyber-phronesis? We'll address a few objections before considering key concepts in Aristotle's understanding of rhetoric. We will then draw from these concepts to review what kind of media the Internet is, how it has been praised and blamed, what one K–12 school network (Great Hearts) is doing, and what we *can* do to prepare students to approach the Internet in a way that is oriented toward their good and the good of others.

Why turn to Aristotle's art of rhetoric to understand cyber-phronesis?

One key objection to turning to rhetoric is that it concerns formal speaking to large audiences, whereas the kind of Internet communication we wish to discuss—where trolling, cyber-bullying, and grooming occur—is informal and often intended only for one person or a small group (McCulloch, 2019, ch. 1). Another key objection is that rhetoric is defined as the art of persuasion (Crider, 2019), whereas the kind of speech we will consider is rarely if ever artful or persuasive. The art of rhetoric seems appropriate to politicans and lawyers from previous decades, not to a generation whose regular communications include the "poomoji."

But Aristotle, though he is deeply concerned with political speech, does not consider rhetoric to be inherently formal or public. Moreover, he doesn't define rhetoric as the art of persuasion. He defines it as "a capacity to observe what admits of being persuasive in each case" (Aristotle, 2019, p. 11 [1355b27–28]).[1] The art of rhetoric involves understanding how words may change how someone thinks, feels, or acts, whether done well or badly, whether for the good or ill of whomever hears or

1. It is unclear exactly how *Art of Rhetoric* relates to *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 2011). In the *Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes sharply between observational thinking (*theōrētikē dianoia*) and productive art (*poiētikē technē*) (2011, pp. 116–124 [1139a18–1141b23]). And yet, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines the art (*technē*) of rhetoric as a power of observation (*theōrēsai*). This definition seems to mix categories kept separate in the *Ethics*. It may be that Aristotle changed his mind between composing one or the other work or that he did not feel bound to keep to a strict set of categories. That said, the two works speak about the same topics in the same ways and can be treated as generally consistent and complementary.

reads them. This makes it sound like rhetoric is at stake in almost any communication whatsoever, e.g., when we debate where to go to dinner, which song is better, etc. We readily grant that, as a practical matter, these informal conversations, even if they do draw from rhetorical strategies, are not the primary object of rhetoric. The primary object is indeed public speech (p. 18 [1358a36–b8]).

But if the online speech that we'll consider is informal, not formal, why turn to rhetoric? Unlike informal speech in prior ages, which, unless it was recorded, was almost always private to a greater or lesser degree, informal online speech may be private in style and intent, but is often very public in its presence and consequences (cf. McCulloch, 2019, ch. 1).

And insofar as human nature does not seem to have changed from Aristotle's time to our own, we may find the rhetorical strategies that Aristotle lists quite familiar: attacking someone's motives or character, turning someone's argument against you back against them, using an error on a minor point to discredit an entire argument, omitting inconvenient facts or points, exaggerating, etc. Some of these, in Aristotle's account, can be used truthfully or misleadingly, some (like omissions and exaggerations) can only be used misleadingly (2019, pp. 127–149 [1395b20–1402a29]).

It'd be a mistake to think that Aristotle is arming the reader to become the victorious head of their debate team. He's also arming the reader against the unscrupulous speaker who'd manipulate and provoke them. But he's doing much more than that.

Aristotle highlights that *the* central feature of anything persuasive is *trust*. And we cultivate trust by appeal to one or more of the following: passion (*pathos*), character (*ēthos*), and argument (*logos*) (Aristotle, 2019, pp. 77, 108, 116–117 [1378a21–30, 1388b31–1389a2, 1391b8–1392a6]).

On the one hand, we can win someone over (a) by stirring up their passions, such as anger, (b) by speaking to what has shaped their attitudes as whole, such as their past experiences, their social class, their maturity, etc., and / or (c) by offering compelling reasons. On the other hand, these strategies do not work if the listener does not trust us in some way, which means that they think that we have (a) good will (*eunoia*), (b) moral virtue (*aretē*),[2] and / or (c) prudence (*phronēsis*) (Aristotle, 2019, p. 77 [1378a8–10]).

Thus, for Aristotle, speeches aren't persuasive; people are. When speeches are persuasive, they lead us to draw conclusions about who gave the speeches. We see this all the time, e.g., in how students regard specific teachers or writers long dead as excellent generally, despite lacking knowledge of the individuals personally, and take offense if anyone suggests otherwise.

Moreover, to be persuasive, to be trusted, no speaker needs to appeal to all three elements. If an enemy makes an argument that's sound, we may trust the enemy's prudence, even if we don't trust their good will. But the most trusted speaker is the one who appears to have all three qualities—

2. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle does not use *aretē* for moral virtue in particular, but for different kinds of virtues, such as moral or intellectual (2011, p. 25 [1103a4–5]). However, in the rhetoric, he uses "virtue" to refer to moral virtues more than to anything distinctly intellectual (see, e.g., 2019. pp. 109–110 [1389a2–b12]), although he still links prudence and virtue (p. 77 [1378a16–17]). Also see our previous note on the relationship between the *Rhetoric* and the *Ethics*.

good will, moral virtue, and prudence—and the most trust-*worthy* speaker is the one who not only appears, but actually *has* all three qualities (Aristotle, 2019, pp. 76–77 [1377b30–1378a20]).[3]

If we are persuaded that these three elements are at stake in any speech that may change how we think, feel, or act, then it is reasonable to analyze online speech in light of them. But, as we shall argue at the end of this paper, Aristotle has an indispensable observation on a topic that is especially contentious for online: friendship. For Aristotle, one cannot understand justice without feeling but also regulating anger (2011, pp.81–83 [1125b26–1126b10]; 2019, pp. 77–85 [1378a31–1380b33]) and one cannot be a proper friend to anyone else without being virtuous. But the friendly speaker, like any friend, wants what is best for their audience. What is best for everyone is to be virtuous. Thus, the friendly speaker doesn't just cultivate their own virtue, they think of what will conduce to the cultivation of virtue in others (Aristotle, 2011, pp. 175–177, 193 [1159a23–b8, 1159b25–34, 1166a1–10]; Aristotle, 2019, pp. 85 [1380b34–1381a29]).

Let us now turn to how the medium of the Internet can be understood as a prelude to analyzing the praise and blame that it has garnered.

Understanding the medium of the Internet: McLuhan

It is nearly trite to speak of the "global village" we inhabit in today's wired world. Yet, the one who first coined that phrase more than 70 years ago was proposing a remarkable vision based on trenchant observations of mass advertising, "electric media," literate culture, ecology of thought, etc. Marshall McLuhan, one of the leading scholars in the budding field of communications, understood with penetrating clarity the nearly overwhelming influence of mass media in the modern world.

Trained by the renowned Cambridge literary scholars, I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, McLuhan's doctoral dissertation would explore the genealogical influences of the trivium on the work of Thomas Nashe. Later published as *The Classical Trivium* (2009), McLuhan's research provides a detailed exposition of the educational role of rhetoric across 2,500 years, demonstrating that a "study of the rhetorical canon from Cicero to Nashe became a study of the modes of education in those centuries. The rhetorical treatises make very little sense apart from the whole tradition of ancient and medieval education" (p. 5). Fortuitously, the scholar of media ecology who observed that "the medium is the message" was informed by a close reading of the intellectual ecology of dialectic and rhetoric, a tradition that shaped literate generations from Aristotle to Arnold.

For our purposes, McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) offers a particular critique concerning the inherent qualities of electric media, as contrasted with the literate culture of print: "Western man acquired from the technology of literacy the power to act without reacting." Said otherwise, literacy has provided civilization with the advantages of detachment, reflection, and deliberation, when operating at its best. By contrast, the disorienting speed of the electric age, "bring[s] all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion [that] has heightened

3. There is an ambiguity—or playfulness?—in the text, such that Aristotle bookends his discussion of these qualities by statements about how, if one is to be trusted, it is useful to appear to have them. Between these bookends, though, he speaks of trust being founded on these qualities, not on the mere appearance of them.

human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree. It is this implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teenager, and some other groups. They can no longer be *contained*, in the political sense of limited association. They are now *involved* in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 150). The town square and the local debate are no longer the locus of political life, once the imagery of TV and the movies persuades us to attend to the "total field" of experience.

An important distinction made by McLuhan concerned "hot media": those forms that stimulate the recipient in immersive "high fidelity" ways, eliciting "low participation" or a passive response. The obvious contrast would be between "hot" videos contrasted with "cool" books. While McLuhan was considering the "hot media" of 1960s and 1970s television and movies, his recognition of our "heightened human awareness" applies all the more in the Digital Age, with our daily deluge of imagery, soundbites, news feeds, and the ubiquitous presence of social media. For McLuhan, these "electric media" were transforming rhetoric, overwhelming opinions and concepts by "alter[ing] sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance" (1964, p. 159). The media is the message, for it modifies the channels of perception and communication.

It follows, then, that the art of rhetoric will require a renewed 'situational awareness,' in order to adapt the tools of persuasion to our contemporary moment, beginning with the essential trust between speakers and interlocutors. In this "Age of Anxiety," as McLuhan called it, the rhetorical approach will be increasingly influenced by (a) the interlocutor's passions under the influence of electric media (e.g., "Did you read those outrageous website comments?"); (b) the cynical attitude of interlocutors who have experienced or witnessed the deceptions and distortions of electric media (e.g., "Who can you trust?"); and (c) the relativistic posture towards truth and the common good (e.g., "But I have my truth, my lived experience…").

If the rhetor's good will, moral virtue, and prudence are to be re-established, we would propose that McLuhan's earliest scholarship on the role of rhetoric could be of genuine import to the Digital Age.

To begin, McLuhan's study of rhetoric in the classical period describes a model of integrity, where the true rhetor embraces the Greek *logos*, which includes both deliberative rationality (dialectic) and eloquent expression (rhetoric). In the Latin formulation, *ratio atque oratio*, this dual purpose of thought and speech are united to provide, as the Stoics propose, "the bond of the state." McLuhan further explains, "Just as for the adherents of the doctrine of the Logos, grammar is the basis of science, and dialectics a part of philosophy, rather than a mere technique of testing evidence, so rhetoric is a virtue, and one which is almost synonymous with wisdom" (1964, p. 64).

The integrity of language for the common good must be reclaimed, in large measure, by recognizing this dualism of thought and speech, a unity of discursive reason and the proclamation of wisdom for the common good. In short, classical rhetoric calls for speakers who are willing to accept the responsibilities of public service in defense of *logos*.

Understanding that our age equates passions with personhood ("my lived experience"), interpreting feelings as the grounds for personal rights, we would do well to rediscover the role of *pathos*—in particular, anger and fear—in understanding what moves our audience to act. The "iGen," as we will

discuss later, is bound up in paradox: the most "connected" generation in history suffers disproportionately from clinical depression. They seem unaware of their true emotional needs, driven by passions inflamed by an addictive media that promises what it cannot provide. We would do well to provide them with the rhetorical consolations of a truly philosophical mind, by explaining their dissatisfaction in terms they can understand.

Thinking of our present day, many perceive rhetoric to be window dressing or manipulation—in any case, not to be taken seriously as the public expression of our highest ideals. After all, what ideals do we share in common today? Yet, a modicum of basic virtues—honesty, integrity, truthfulness—will be necessary for the recovery of public rhetoric designed to enhance the public square.

Our ability to promote a rhetoric of good will—where men and women recognize our interdependence and our need for common cause—will require that we re-establish the basis for *ethos*, where moral virtue begins, with an understanding of this generation's "lived experiences," including increasing self-regard and expectations; growing cynicism toward authority and institutions; greater tolerance of non-traditional mores; decreasing capacity for adulthood; and so on (see Twenge section below). Today's youthful audience will require astute and charitable rhetors, who are willing to acknowledge the conflicting sources this generation has received imbibed to arrive at "their truth," if those same rhetors are to be able to present the possibility of universal truth and the common good.

Praising Internet language: Gretchen McCulloch

We will consider next how online language has been lauded, turning to Gretchen McCulloch's *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (2019) for several reasons.

First, unlike other thinkers who weigh the pros and cons of online discourse (e.g., Carr, 2008; Carr, 2010; Crystal, 2006; Crystal, 2011; Dreyfus, 2009; Twenge, 2006; Twenge, 2017), McCulloch is unabashedly positive and optimistic about the Internet, a stance that is at once refreshing and troubling. As we noted in the introduction, if the Internet were simply beneficial, we wouldn't need to talk about how difficult it is curb abuses. But if it were simply harmful, we wouldn't need to talk about it at all; it would presumably die off. An yet it's ever-expanding and seems here to stay. Given this, some consideration of its benefits, both real and potential, is surely in order. Second, McCulloch's book has been widely commended by reviewers in such publications as *Elle, Esquire*, NPR, *The New York Times*, and *People* as well as by well-known linguists, such as David Crystal and John McWhorter. It's even been named among the best books of the year by Amazon, *Time*, and *The Washington Post*. And, third, the book is timely, having come out shortly before Netflix's excoriating documentary *The Social Dilemma* (2020), which concludes that the best thing we can do for children is to keep them as far away from social media as possible. McCulloch strongly challenges that conclusion.

At first, it may not seem that McCulloch is setting out to defend Internet language; she is merely describing how it has evolved and where it's at now. However, early in *Because Internet*, she raises the question of whether the Internet is alienating and unable to yield meaningful friendships—a crucial question given that the teenage years are when we develop the habits of language that define who we

are, how we speak, with what groups we identify, etc. (McCulloch, 2019, ch. 1). She bluntly express how she feels about this question, "[It]'s been a long time dying" (ch. 3).

She adopts several strategies to help its demise. First, she draws analogies between online and offline communication. She notes, for example, how teenagers' online discussions about nothing in particular, their gossiping, their friend lists, etc. are nothing all that different from the way teenagers interacted before the Internet, whether at the mall, in school hallways, or in their parents' basements. Her point is important: Let's not confuse the features of being a teenager with inherent problems in Internet speech.

She strengthens these analogies by categorizing different kinds of communities. People interact with others online on topics that interest them. They may never encounter these people in person. But that's not alienating. It's giving people an important way to remain connected when there's no one around who shares their interests. McCulloch likens these virtual spaces to Ray Oldenburg's "third places," which include cafés, community centers, malls, etc., anywhere where people may go to meet like-minded individuals not otherwise in their social circle. She's claims that it's possible that these encounters will develop deeper relationships (McCulloch, 2019, ch. 6). A different kind of community emerges when social media is an extension of one's offline interactions and friendships, e.g., texting with parents, following each other on Instagram, TikTok, etc. (ch. 3). Any parent who's listened to their child insist that they need a cellphone to remain connected to their school friends will see the truth in McCulloch's claim.

Another strategy McCulloch adopts concerns how the Internet is evolving. Consider "context collapse," the problem that online, unlike offline, a photo or comment intended for one's close friends can also be seen by a parent or teacher. McCulloch notes how, as the Internet matured and more social media platforms became available, young people could move from one platform to another, change their handle, leave certain items for one close friends on one platform and family members in another. Amd now there are platforms that delete posts after 24 hours, permit live-only streaming, offer privacy settings, etc. These allow informal Internet speech to acquire some of the ephemerality and thus privacy that informal offline speech enjoys (McCulloch, 2019, ch. 3).

Finally, McCulloch notes how Internet language itself, not just platforms, has evolved to compensate for the lack of an embodied self online. As we all know, the lack of this embodied self makes it easier to misunderstand and offend others, as we cannot convey tone of voice. Or can we? McCulloch notes how "lol," once used to indicate "laughing out loud," is now used to soften statements that might otherwise seem critical or harsh. Other acronyms, like "iirc" ("if I recall correctly") and "imo" ("in my opinion") are designed to compensate for the inability to indicate a bashfulness that can be conveyed by body language and voice, but not typing. Emoji, though they can be illustrative (e.g., a cake to represent "birthday") are often gestural, that is, they help to add that all-important way in which we use our hands and bodies to communicate our attitude along with our words. "Likes" allow us to show the kind of approval formerly conveyed by a smile, showing that we're listening without having to offer a full response. And there's a "netiquette" to go along with all this: McCulloch notes how when people post something negative about someone, it is customary to leave the identity of the person in question vague, whereas it is positive, they name names (2019, chs. 3–5).

Thus, though McCulloch never puts it this way, Internet language is a reflection, not a perversion, of human nature. For better and worse, it includes the same foibles we have in offline life, like gossiping, but it also gives new space for us to interact with each other in ways that are playful, supportive, and, above all, rewarding, insofar as they help us to discuss topics we love with others who share our passions.

Moreover, her attention to how language shapes identity, to how different platforms serve different kinds of audiences, to how we can manage "context collapse," etc., all offer rich topics for deepening a child's cyber-phronesis.

At the same time, though, she adopts questionable strategies. For example, she's insistent that we not treat the experience of earlier Internet ages as definitive, but uses research from 1999 and 2003 to claim that "[s]tudies consistently show" that teenagers prefer to hang out in-person than online (McCulloch, 2019, ch. 3). She claims that we should avoid the mistakes of "an advertiser or philosopher" (an unusual combination) who hypothesizes rather than turns to what actually happens (ch. 5). And yet McCulloch hypothesizes about deeper relationships forming through online. And she insists that the Internet increases democracy, offering new opportunities to fight unjust laws, but also endorses banning individuals and message board topics. Criminal hate speech has no place on the Internet (ch. 6), but McCulloch doesn't offer any clear guidelines for what is acceptable, what not, beside her friendliness toward the left and distaste for the alt-right. Her "Kinder, Gentler Internet" is one in which "flamewars" are mentioned only in passing (ch. 4) and seems to include shutting down one side of highly charged political debates.

Finally, and perhaps most revealing, her defense of Internet speech rests almost exclusively upon its capacity to convey emotion, in particular a degree of kindness, and cultivate interactions with others. For Aristotle, good will (*eunoia*) and friendliness (*philia*) belong to passion (*pathos*). And we may rightly wonder whether emoji and other such strategies can truly stand in place of body language and tone of voice. As for the other two elements of rhetoric, character (*ēthos*) and argument (*logos*), they are either absent from McCulloch's consideration or only there in the most shadowy way (hence the reference to "afterlife" in our paper title).

Blaming Internet Language: Nicholas Carr and Jean Twenge

One of the first to articulate concerns with the internet's ubiquitous presence in our lives was Nicholas Carr, the author and journalist who popularized his critique of the medium in *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2010). The 2008 *Atlantic* article that provided a precis of Carr's thesis is entitled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" and it was one of the most popular pieces of journalism that year, articulating felt concerns in ways that echoed McLuhan's earlier prophecies.

Carr was keen to point out that the tools of literacy—from handwritten scrolls to Gutenberg's press to typewriters to word-processors—are each qualitatively distinct, generating different effects on the literate user. Yet, while the dissemination of information

has now advanced to nearly uncountable levels (hence "Google"), Carr explains that the human brain has limits of memory, associations, and attention—all of which factor into the activities of mind to produce genuine intellectual fulfillment: recollection, imaginative insights, novel solutions, and deep thought. As Carr warns:

> [T]he Net isn't the alphabet, and although it may replace the printing press, it produces something altogether different. The kind of deep reading that a sequence of printed pages promotes is valuable not just for the knowledge we acquire from the author's words but for the intellectual vibrations those words set off within our own minds. In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book, or by any other act of contemplation, for that matter, we make or own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas. Deep reading is indistinguishable from deep thinking. (2010, p. 74)

Said otherwise, we must consider the medium's capacity to produce "quiet spaces" of "contemplation," if we aim to convey messages of deep thought.

Could McCulloch's "third places" online provide the needed space for young people to experience deep thoughts today? As psychologist Jean M. Twenge explores the lives and times of these "digital natives," there is great cause for concern. Twenge's first book, *Generation Me* (2006), collated and interpreted the results of more than 30 longitudinal studies of generational cohorts with 11 million survey-respondents, seeking to uncover behavioral trends and attitudes indicative of the generation born with the advent of the Internet (ca. 1995). In the early 2000s, Twenge was noticing a pronounced sense of self-importance among teens, along with significant lessening of civic engagement and trust of institutions.

She followed that book with *iGen* (2017), a continuation of her earlier work, with an added sense of urgency, when she observed "abrupt shifts in teens' behaviors and emotional states," beginning around 2012. Twenge hypothesized that the timing of these shifts was more than coincidental, likely related to the advent of smartphone access to the internet. Moreover, Twenge argues that there are significant generational changes that affect the way iGen conceives of themselves and their place in the world: "They are not as much self-absorbed as self-important" (2017, p. 8), unhurried in their pursuit of adult responsibilities, constantly online, yet insecure about their performance and economic prospects and indefinite about their commitments and political life. In short, members of the iGen cohort are some of the most savvy consumers of the online cornucopia, yet they remain unsatisfied at the deepest levels of personhood.

In particular, Twenge's analyses of online behaviors and intellectual performance may provide us with some insights on the internet's influence on this generation's abilities to communicate and persuade, to cultivate character, and to deal with their emotions.

Social media, in particular, provides the primary conduit for iGen to interact with their peers. While the providers have changed in relative market share (e.g., Instagram displacing Facebook among teenagers), contra McCulloch's outdated research, connectivity remains the primary value for young people, especially teenagers. The social media apps are not designed

for the exchange of ideas or the development of arguments, but rather the immediate display of the crowd's affirmation of a given fad—the equivalent of a daily popularity contest. A contest being played for keeps, in some cases.

Meanwhile, traditional literacy, from book to newspapers and magazines, is on the wane, affecting reading habits, most notably in the attention span of users. One study cited by Twenge related the online activities of college students on their laptops. Tasks were switched, on average, every 19 seconds, with 75% of the windows being opened and closed within a minute (2017, p. 64). Attention is being fragmented with enormous force.

Twenge's research is particularly salient to questions concerning the internet's psychological and sociological effects on this "wired" generation. Closely following the *Monitoring the Future* longitudinal surveys (1976–2015) of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders, Twenge shows—again, contra McCulloch—that today's teens are growing up more slowly over the past two decades: going out on fewer dates, acquiring driver's licenses later in life, getting fewer afterschool jobs (and earning less money), and being less prone to underage drinking and other risky behaviors (Twenge, 2017, p. 42).

At the same time, adolescents have more discretionary income and leisure time than any previous generation, prompting them to look for evermore individualistic ways of amusing themselves. Members of iGen are choosing to spend their time exploring the video-centric vignettes of Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, etc., while manicuring their avatars for virtual encounters, within the parameters of the latest social media platform.

Those platforms are focused on quick, visual, emotive bursts of entertainment that can be passively viewed and scrolled past, with a constant "feed" of the next new, new thing—a seemingly endless display of content. Where communication does take place within a larger forum (e.g., Instagram), the tendency is for users to generate carefully crafted episodes from their lives to promote a desirable simulation, worthy of "friends," with quick, telegraphic commentary providing expressions of (mostly) affirmation.

For an older generation, the virtual persona continues in forums like Twitter, where the desirable post is pithy, humorous, or cutting remark designed to create a stir among the audience. In all of this, the performative dimension to these activities is premised on obtaining more positive interest and "followers." Thus, the more creative or witty or snarky one appears, the more the cyber crowd responds.

Surely we should not be surprised that a generation of Americans who have disliked school, avoided reading, preferred the comforts of home, and now enjoy the stimulation of the digitally-mediated forum (especially tailored to youthful interests) are a generation uninterested, even averse to the challenge of rhetoric, as traditionally conceived: the public forum where adults of all ages are called upon to articulate thoughts and produce persuasive arguments for the benefit of society.

Particularly pointed are Twenge's citation of research drawn from the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (n=272,600 respondents) over the past 30 years. According to those researchers, a noticeable decline in creativity in American young people includes: (1)

decreasing ability to elaborate on ideas and provide detailed reflections on arguments; (2) students' lack of interest in creative outlets (e.g., music, crafts, offline hobbies); and (3) less encouragement for creative activities at home, school, and beyond (cf. Kyung Hee Kim, 2011). As Twenge reports in *iGen,* these very offline creative activities, including sports, positively correlate with overall mental health. Whereas, online immersion correlates strongly with increasing incidence of loneliness, depression and, in the extreme, suicide.

Twenge has done a remarkable service to the general public, offering a meta-analysis of the psychological literature, alongside moving vignettes of iGen representatives. Twenge is no Luddite, for she proposes using the technology to more effectively reach this generation—e.g., modifying college textbooks (like the ones she uses in class) to provide greater accessibility to an audience that is increasingly inattentive, even clinically deficient in regard to attention.

The response of Great Hearts classical K–12 schools

While this generation's story is poignant, even somewhat tragic, we would propose an alternative therapy to the digitally saturated atmosphere of our young people. And, from the experience of Great Hearts (GH), in Arizona and Texas (and soon to be in two more states), we believe that a viable alternative can be found in classical K–12 schools.

Founded in 2003 with a single charter school in Phoenix, Arizona, Great Hearts has grown to more than 21,000 students in 33 charter schools in three metropolitan areas—with plans to grow into five more states in the next decade, with the goal of serving 50,000 students. In the wake of COVID, GH also launched an online charter school to serve even more families, many of whom are now exploring other educational options outside their local district and private schools.

The distinctive features of GH are enveloped within the classical model they propagate, with its emphasis on the liberal arts (the trivium and quadrivium), great works, and Socratic seminar, across the essential disciplines of study—mathematics, languages, science, literature, history, and the fine arts (including drama, poetry, music, etc.). For the grammar school, students are led through a systematic introduction to literacy and numeracy, under the aegis of content curated for essential "cultural literacy" (Hirsch, 1988)—but always with an eye on the quality of texts, whether science, literature, history, etc.

At the heart of the GH classical model is genuine liberal education. As the website explains:

> Liberal education consists of cognitive, emotional, and moral education—thinking deeply, loving noble things, and living well together. We believe, with Plato, that the highest goal of education is to become good, intellectually and morally. (Great Hearts America, 2021)

Becoming good is the goal, and everything in the school must be selected to promote that end: classroom etiquette, curricular selections, hallway artifacts, athletics, etc. By contrast with much of K–12 education, GH eschews the presence of handheld devices, requiring students to "locker them" during the day, for use only after school hours (or with special permission in extenuating circumstances). The emphasis on in-person instruction, close reading of texts, careful observations in the laboratory, and the experience of a lively form of inquiry (known as "Socratic") are the underlying pedagogical practices of a classical school. Developing students' ability to converse, produce arguments, present evidence, clarify ambiguities, and persuade others of their respective positions in a civil and edifying fashion is at the heart of school life.

In addition, we have introduced a series of exercises across the upper grades (6–12), whereby students begin to understand the rhetorical nature of language—definitions, syllogistic and analogic reasoning, stylistic improvements, etc.—both by way of explication of the texts before them and their deployment of the rhetorical tools with which they become familiar.

Two years ago, we launched a new course entitled "The American Rhetorical Tradition." (You must understand that this is a novel undertaking for schools that pride themselves on nearly 20 years of a fixed curriculum.) Premised on the notion that America is a nation founded upon ideas, which themselves had to be communicated persuasively, we surveyed countless speeches, pamphlets and broadsides, jury trials, legislative deliberations, and other examples of public language, to identify two dozen texts (and where possible, video depictions) of representative rhetoric in the American tradition.

Essential to the course was the activity of the students—all seniors—who are required to both analyze and imitate (in a 21st century register) the types of public language that serves to enrich the public square: judicial arguments, letters (private and open), policy deliberations, panegyrics, etc. Key to the students' understanding is the experience of modulating their contemporary voice to the intellectual pitch of their masterful predecessors, without sounding pretentious or ostentatious. They must learn to produce artful demonstrations of rhetoric, drawing upon the *pathos* of this generation, embodying the *ēthos* of their convictions, and articulating the *logos* of their arguments, in service to the common good.

While teaching rhetoric across the middle and secondary grades has certainly increased our student's abilities to think and express themselves more persuasively. We remain concerned that most students' time outside of school remains a digital free-for-all that we cannot adequately account for. Teaching our students about ultimate truth, in hopes of inspiring them to pursue the beautiful and the good, we must find more creative ways to demonstrate the effective use of the rhetoric they are studying and practicing in school, once they pick up their handheld device or tablet and begin chatting, commenting, and communicating via digital media.

We would even venture that a series of talks, demonstrations, and casual conversations with faculty and peer groups surrounding the possibility of cyber-phronesis would be a good, next

step for GH. But that will require thoughtful and creative forms that have yet to be produced for our schools.

Conclusion

As we mentioned at the beginning, Aristotle may have a helpful suggestion. In order to bridge the passion (*pathos*) of the current generation with a recovery of character (*ēthos*) and reasoned argument (*logos*), we need to recover a proper sense of friendship, of the kind of individual who doesn't just reflect upon what is right and wrong, which tends to the righteous anger and condemnation already so common online, but who also reflects upon what it means to give *others* opportunities to exercise virtue. When we call someone to the mat for an argument we think flawed or a moral position we consider compromised, are we truly inviting them to exercise virtue, or rejecting them in way that'll provoke a wounded and thus more unjust response?

Aristotle notes that the one possessed of genuine friendship is also possessed of justice and that friendship is completed in citizenship. There was a time when such statements may have sounded an odd note: Friendships are private; citizenship public. But in a time when political differences divide friends and families alike, when private and public is blurred online, perhaps we can again see Aristotle's wisdom in linking friendship, justice, and citizenship. Educating so as to restore Aristotelian friendship, informed by our deeper understanding of Internet language and its implications, may be the road toward a more prudent, virtuous, and well-intentioned digital citizenship.

McCulloch would have us believe that the Internet is a good place, where we've found new and innovative ways to share our interests, support each other, advance democracy and rights, and create deep friendships. We respectfully disagree, but we think that a neo-Aristotelian approach to cultivating cyber-phronesis, one that draws from Aristotle's profound insights into rhetoric, can help us to make the Internet become the place that McCulloch believes it to be.

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