Reflection on the varieties of public discord common to Greco-Roman antiquity formed a key resource for rhetoric’s early life as a practice of civic learning. For Isocrates, excellence in “the study of political discourse” happened not in a vacuum, but in response to resonant and timely narratives of controversy that offered themselves to various paths of interpretation. These accounts described real (and often hypothetical) occasions of dispute from which the student would then learn to invent a range of responses. To turn these concrete stories of disagreement into resources for civic learning was to make them the textual ground upon which rhetoric study could maintain its link to the real. Such accounts were not merely descriptive or theoretical, but pedagogical and practical in their end.

Today’s universities hardly resemble Isocrates’ Athenian school, and yet modern public address scholars might begin to approach “the study of political discourse” in a similar fashion. On the lookout for ways to stimulate the rhetorical dispositions suited to a landscape of increasing division, we might turn to such clashes as touchstones from which to bring advanced scholarship on the language of politics—our own scholarly narratives of discord—into conversation with the formative, practical ambitions of rhetoric study. “On Civic Learning” will feature a range of diverse approaches to political division that nevertheless share a stake in rhetoric’s claim to a normative role in defining and addressing the best ways to cope with the challenges of public life amidst conditions of conflict and uncertainty.

What makes for productive, civically useful knowledge when it comes to how we approach political controversy? How can public address research help us—as scholars, as teachers, as citizens—to tap this knowledge in order to approach differences more wisely and argue with each other more eloquently? With such questions in mind, and a broad, inclusive vision of the field in sight, our purpose is to stage a discussion that places public address research into dialogue with growing calls to revitalize rhetoric’s pedagogical mission.

Since this conference first met in 1988, scholars of public address have had success in producing a corpus of increasingly specialized historical, hermeneutic, and critical knowledge about national and international political discourse. As such research proceeds apace, however, there is growing attention to rhetoric’s history as a form of civic learning geared toward fostering habits of political, ethical, and rhetorical judgment. Uniting scholars across the disciplinary spectrum, this civic aspect of the “pedagogical turn” in rhetoric amounts to more than a plea to take public speaking or composition classes more seriously. In a different key, it also raises core questions about the purpose, character, and ends of contemporary rhetoric scholarship. What about the rhetorical criticism of public address changes, in short, when scholars aim to apply its lessons directly to the task of defining and cultivating the rhetorical aptitudes of a functioning polity?

Because the terms “rhetorical criticism” and “public address” have undergone expansion and enrichment since the conference first convened, “On Civic Learning” makes itself open to an array of scholarship, such as: studies of unexamined episodes of past social and political division; commentary on the rhetorical fault lines of contemporary politics; research into how relations of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class shape civic controversy; explorations of how visual rhetoric can stage, spark and resolve conflict; close analyses of key speeches and debates in the history of public address; accounts of the discourses of competing social movements; studies of divergent rhetorics of commemoration; investigations of public memory as a site of division; inquiries into international and military discourses of discord; and more. In short, we invite rhetoricians of all stripes to explore, practice, and debate ways to make their scholarship speak to rhetoric’s ancient commitment to sustaining the ecology of civic life.

Please email the conference director, Antonio de Velasco (adevelsc@memphis.edu) for more information.