

Cindy Tekobbe, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Composition, Rhetorics, and English Studies  
College of Arts & Science  
University of Alabama  
cindy.tekobbe@ua.edu

Good afternoon. I'm Cindy Tekobbe, and I'm a rhetorician and sociolinguist from the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Alabama. You're asking yourselves right now what a rhetorician and sociolinguist is doing at this conference. It's fine. I woke up this morning wondering that same thing.

I don't have slides. This isn't a talk about facts or data. It's a talk about people and communication. Stakeholders and service providers. In this talk, I'm going to make an argument for using local storytelling as a means of supporting public policy initiatives. And this talk is going to be a bit meta; a bit of a performance. I'm going to use my storytelling, for which I'm advocating here, to frame out this talk that is less about hard data and more about human practices.

And, I'm here to talk to you today specifically about using storytelling to rupture the polarization that can derail public initiatives and policies, as well as ways stakeholders might use storytelling to construct more complex communication spaces and develop and foster local support for water projects and initiatives.

In this talk, I'm going to first explain what I do in order to lay the groundwork for the practices I'll describe. Next, I will discuss some of the issues that derail efforts to communicate with

diverse audiences and adopt policy initiatives. Then I will describe the practice of cultural rhetorics, how these types of stories work to persuade, and finally, I'll mention my current research project mapping local stories in support of water projects and initiatives.

First, a quick review of my disciplines and their terminologies:

What is rhetoric?

In short, rhetoric is the art of persuasion. That's the mostly commonly known definition. But rhetoric is also the study of how facts become knowledge, and then how knowledge becomes meaningful to specific audiences, cultures, and/or communities. It is about belief as an affirming feeling and how those feelings are activated in a particular audience.

For example, rhetoric describes how data on rising ocean temperatures becomes an understanding for a parent that the climate is changing, and then becomes the catalyst for her family to eliminate red meat from their diet and install solar panels on their roof as a way to do something meaningful to support their concern for the future and their belief that individual action matters in the stewardship of the environment.

What is sociolinguistics?

Sociolinguistics examine how culture impacts the way language is used, its meaning, and its associated evocations. For example, I'm a former Sun Devil from Arizona State University. In the desert, we say "fear the fork." No one outside AZ knows what that means ... it's like having a password for a secret society. In my work, I travel internationally, and the moment people from

just about anywhere see my Bama logo on my bag, they yell “Roll Tide!” at me. Many, many people know the Crimson Tide. However, the “roll tide” I heard the last time I was in the UK is not the same as the roll tide, my students blurt out in class when one of their classmates makes a particularly salient discussion point. Roll tide in the UK is “I recognize your American football thing,” and “roll tide” among my students is an “amen” in the family church. The differences in these culturally imbedded meanings of the expression “roll tide” are sociolinguistics.

My rhetorical training is in the classical western tradition. And throughout this four-thousand-year rhetorical tradition, we have taught classical persuasion, this construction of a compelling belief within an audience, by invoking three of the pillars of rhetoric: *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

I’m sure you all remember these from your undergrad days:

*Logos* is arguments based in facts and data

*Ethos* represents the credibility and credentialing of the speaker

And *pathos* is reserved for the pulling of heart strings.

In our work as scholars, scientists, planners, developers, industry, and policy makers, we deal largely in *logos* and *ethos*.

We rely on the *logos* of our replicable lab studies, our case studies, and our field studies. We rely on industry standards, methodologies and mathematics. These taken together are the evidences for our cases.

And we present our evidence standing on the credibility of our credentials – our *ethos*. And these credentials are more than just our degrees and our professional licenses. They're also our organizations and associations. The legacies of our institutions and our companies. They are our branding and market leverage. Roll Tide!

For example, as a rhetorician, speaking to a professional conference, I stand on my software industry experience, my PhD from Arizona State, and my tenure track appointment at the University of Alabama. These are the credentials that sustain my invitation to speak today.

Speaking to a conference of scholars, I am the student of Keith D. Miller, the civil rights rhetorician from Texas Christian whose published works include texts on Dr Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. I am James Paul Gee's student, the sociolinguist from Berkley, who has published a dozen books, and is known for an eponymous methodology: The Gee Toolkit of Discourse Analysis. This legacy of instruction is my scholarly *ethos*.

Taken together, these are the things that make me an expert. Similarly, you all have your own credentials and training in support of your own *ethos*. And while at one time, these credentials were enough to impress an audience and to accept that what we have to say is credible and valid. And in fact, capital I-Important, that isn't the case today. Which is a drag because we all spent a lot of time in school, and that was before all the time we spent studying and practicing before we sat for our licenses and certifications.

Today in public discourse, we are working in a time of great political and cultural polarization. Of great skepticism of intellectuals and authority figures. Of a mistrust of government, corporations, business leaders and politicians, both local and national.

If you read newspapers, follow social media (my expert advice: don't) or watch the infotainment programming of network news, you know that we are a nation divided. That's the buzz today: that Americans disagree vehemently on everything.

Except they don't. Not really.

A 2012 study by the Democracy Fund demonstrated that 75% of Democrats and 95% of Republicans think speaking English is essential to be an American. Essential. That's an overwhelming majority of Americans. Further, the same study determined that only 16% of Americans feel European descent is important to be an American. That's a very small minority. In other words, we agree as Americans that it doesn't really matter where you're from, as long as you love our country and speak English, you're one of us. That's a pretty broad definition of what it means to be an American. And a huge majority of us agree on it. And, if you dive into similar kinds of survey data, you'll discover Americans broadly agree on many things, including supporting small businesses, public libraries, and the education of children.

It's when we get down to the nuances and details of how to implement policy where our sharp divides become apparent, where our ideologies take over, and where our personal confirmation bias kicks in.

For example, we may believe speaking English and loving the country is enough to identify as an American, but we've got widely differing viewpoints about:

- Immigration control and enforcement
- The conviction of and pardoning of former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio
- The southern border wall
- DACA and what to do with the Dreamers

In fact, the shouting about these issues over the dinner table is why I'm not headed home for Thanksgiving in Phoenix with my in-laws this year.

And as I described, we used to rely on more than just our own feelings to resolve these issues. We had government sources, thinktanks, professional practitioners, and long form journalism. That was before we were shouting "fake news" and "alternative facts" at each other.

So to sum up the current state of public discourse: we can and do agree on broad initiatives for the common good, but we can't agree on the nuts and bolts because we've got feelings, and we don't trust any of the traditional sources of information to help us sort out those feelings.

Instead, we further complicate the public policy quagmire by falling back on these feelings and ideologies that result in broad generalizations, which lead to gross inaccuracies about highly complex and nuanced data.

We have replicable lab studies, case studies, and field studies. We have science, math, and law. But all of that is currently reduced to liberal/conservative, right/wrong, and red/blue feelings.

So how do we penetrate this ideological divide and the public mistrust of institutions and professionals? How do we resist the dangerously gross simplifications of our work when we can't rely on our *logos* and *ethos*?

Cultural rhetorics, unlike classical rhetorics (and here' I'm guilty of gross simplification of my field to make a point) removes knowledge and meaning from philosophical musings and abstract frameworks about caves and whether or not we exist, and relocates it back into lived experiences of people's individual lives and histories. It asks people to relay their own stories and narratives, without the audience assessing what is "true." It's the story about why water is important to me personally. About how I grew up hiking the White Mountains of Arizona, sleeping under the stars on the Mogollon Rim, and drinking fresh water straight from the creeks

and rivers that were fed by high elevation snowmelt. Personal narratives and lived experience aren't about truth – it doesn't matter that the first fish I ever caught was on the White River or on Christopher Creek, or whether it was a 14" German Brown trout or an 18" Rainbow trout. The importance of that story is that I was seven years old and working with a child's pole and bobber, and I out-fished my father that day. And in that meaningful family moment, I inherited a legacy of environmental stewardship from my father through these childhood experiences. That narrative is shared by many children of my generation, and it's a legacy that most of us would like to see enacted in our own children.

I'm not talking about second-hand stories here. Stories we picked up from somewhere else and relayed to an audience in support of our own agendas. Second hand stories typically are told less to inform and more to re-inscribe personal belief onto an audience (many of my students have a second-hand anecdote about someone using a WIC card in a grocery store to buy Twinkies, these anecdotes are apocryphal, which derails any discussion with my students about public programs for infants and women, but none of my students have witnessed this perceived misuse of public funds first hand.). We call this "rhetorical slippage," slippage being a word I'm sure you're all familiar with, where meaning is disconnected from its context and falls away into simplistic accounts.

What we need are not more second hand "facts," but more complex communication spaces where detail is retained and the thorny layers of problems are not reduced to simple binaries.

But this is hard work. Getting people to address and account for their own ideologies, positionalities and agendas is really, really difficult. Rhetoricians like me have special training in retaining objectivity, and we fail at it often. I fail almost every time I enter a new classroom the first time, and then I have to haul myself in and remind myself that I'm a rhetorician, and as a disciplinary practice, I reject initial impressions based on my "gut."

So, cultural rhetorics as a practice "focuses on *how* a specific community makes meaning and negotiates systems of communication to disseminate knowledge" (Powell).

Cultural rhetorics asks for first personal accounts. It asks for residents to lead the conversation on issues within their own communities. It asks experts like us to listen and to foster togetherness with those communities. We, as experts, commit to experiencing through the first person accounts the significance, importance, and meaning behind those local and personal narratives.

In Tuscaloosa, where I am currently living and teaching, there are a number of water-issues.

When I first arrived, coming as I do from Arizona where I grew up drinking from rivers and eating from lakes, I was pretty astounded to discover how polluted the Black Warrior River truly was. I found out when I asked colleagues if we could swim in it. Crazy talk that.

During recent rainfall, there were a number of sewage spillages into Northport waterways. As I understand it, and I am not a public planner or structural engineer, so forgive me here, the issue at hand is storm drains that were inadequate to the specific level of rainfall.

My first awareness of the issues of sewage spillage was from a social media effort by John Wathan, the Hurricane Creek keeper, who co-runs the Facebook group Friends of Hurricane Creek. This social media presence carries many first-hand accounts of the significance of this waterway to members of the community. Upon further exploration, I found a number of other waterway keepers in Alabama also running social media presences that shared first-hand experiences with these waterways. In Mike Freeman's (Auburn and Panel Speaker 1) specialty, there are Water Watch programs and projects. I've found local community stories histories around lakes and rivers.

Where I can't get a class of 15 students to agree that water pollution on the BWR in general is a problem, these social media presences draw people out on regular work days to collect trash and complete creekside cleanup, hike trails, run test, and share their own stories of these unique and locally significant waterways.

So, this is my current research and my proposal to this conference. I've begun mapping and documenting these community water efforts across Alabama. I'm collecting their personal and local first-hand stories. And I'm suggesting to you that as researchers, developers, and scientists, these local efforts can be valuable sources of first-person narratives. Narratives that

create the personal groundwork for us to initiative conversations where the issue of whether or not we should or shouldn't care about this body of water, whether it is red or blue, or liberal or conservative and any number of other false tautologies are set aside. Because based on these narratives, these people already care about their local issues. They're already personally involved. They already know the waterways intimately and personally. And we can build on these narratives to retain the complexities of the issues, discuss their merits of initiatives in a nuanced way, and by listening and partnering, break through the rhetorical gridlock.

I plan on continuing this work over the next two years and hope to produce a careful mapping of these cultural rhetorical practices as they relate to water because they are a valuable resource in their own right. And I invite you to listen to local stories as well. The worst thing that happens is you hear some great fishing tales.

I thank you for your attention and your time.