

Study of Rhetoric Is A Study in Hope

These days, we are inundated with information – about every possible subject, from every possible medium. In so many ways, rhetoric plays an important role in our lives. The study of rhetoric provides the tools we need not only to analyze ideas presented to us, but also offers the tools we may use to defend our own ideas, whether we are leading a group or having a discussion with friends.

Rhetoric – the art or study of using language and the skill of using language effectively and persuasively – is an important tool that is offered in UWM’s Rhetorical Leadership Program. It’s a concentration in the Communication Master’s program or a stand-alone graduate certificate.

According to Kathryn Olson, associate professor, Communication, who is the Rhetoric Program director, it is geared toward students who want to upgrade their communication skills, who are looking for an alternative to a public relations approach to leadership, and who want the resources to analyze and solve complex public communication problems.

Olson said studying rhetoric really is an optimistic venture and, contrary to some popular thought, not the study of insincere or pretentious speech. The study of rhetoric at UWM is focused on preparing flexible leaders in the practical, humanities-based rhetorical tradition. As an academic specialty that means making, evaluating and improving arguments in practical, ever-changing, decision-making situations.

She emphasized that the program integrates practice with theory, beyond the usual leadership training, so that graduates have tools to use in their everyday communication challenges as citizens, professionals, parents and community members. Some classes analyze communication successes of proven rhetorical leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy, as well as those of less well-known people.

Olson’s interest in the study of rhetoric actually began when she was “conscripted” into her



high school debate team – her brother wanted to establish the group, but needed one more person. Olson was it. “I enjoyed the research, then going out and defending my ideas, and critically looking at what was said and presented to me,” she explained.

Students who have taken the courses taught by Olson, John Jordan, assistant professor, and Bill Keith, associate professor, include a labor organizer, a lawyer, a school board member, a person working on domestic violence legal cases and educators.

The course offerings include: Rhetorical Leadership and Ethics, Communication and Social Order, Argumentation Theory and Practice, Rhetorical Theory, and Rhetorics of Constituting Community and Social Controversy.

“I really think you have to be optimistic to study this, because you see some possibility for choice and making a difference,” Olson said. “You can use this knowledge in so many everyday situations, such as advocating on behalf of family members who are patients.”

In a larger sense, through community organizations, you may choose to help different communities really communicate with each other, Olson pointed out. Rhetoric is a way to build bridges between people – and there’s nothing more optimistic than that. [R](#)

Learn more

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