

Rhetorical Silence and Rhetorical Listening: Taking a look at the effectiveness of diversity rhetoric on members of culturally-relevant student organizations.

Taylor Waits

University of Texas at San Antonio

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

Abstract

Black and Brown peoples in America have been harassed, intimidated, and threatened by hostile rhetoric like signs and banners protesting integration, for example. College students are not exempt from this harassment of racist messages like “niggers deserve to die” at the College at Brockport in New York (2016), and “niggers don’t belong here” at Grace College in Indiana being written on a diversity floor on a dormitory door (2017). According to a report from the Anti-Defamation League, racist fliers, banners and stickers were found on college campuses 147 times in fall 2017, an increase of more than three times of the 2016 report which documented 41 cases reported. From 2016 to 2017, the appearances of White nationalist flyers or banners have progressively appeared, specifically in East and West Texas, college and university campuses.

In order to combat actions such as the abuse of free speech and superficial policies that allow the expression of White nationalist ideologies to go unchecked, many administrators struggle to find the right balance between ensuring policies of diversity and policies of action that attempt to combat the issue of abusing free speech. Administrators often are left with the decision to defend its minority students or remain ambivalent. This ambivalence is often interpreted as silence on issues involving students of color or may result in superficial policies that cover up the root of racism and violence on campuses. At an Hispanic-Serving institute in the southern part of the hill country Texas released multiple documents addressing faculty, staff, and students. To deliver a unified message in the face of these racialized tactics, this university promoted a rhetoric of diversity and inclusion through emails, flyers, and banners. These banners consisted of

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

sayings like “We are all different, but one big family” insinuating that the institution as well as the student body accepts one another as their family regardless of their background. Diversity and inclusion rhetoric often has a colorblind undertone which dismisses the issues that plague students of color and instead ask students to remove everyone’s identity and see them as a “colorless” person or “just a person”.

This paper examines the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion rhetoric, specifically the diversity and inclusion campaigns focused on unifying the student body with explicit focus on diversity and difference as means of equality, on members of culturally-relevant student organizations on the university's campus, and engage, reflect, and challenge the underlying university politics.

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

Rhetorical Silence And Rhetorical Listening: Taking A Look At The Effectiveness Of Diversity Rhetoric On Members Of Culturally-Relevant Organizations.

In America's current political climate, college and university administrators have to make difficult decisions about diversity policies on their campuses. College students and have been the center of social reform in America for many decades. During the civil rights era, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) formed from students and local activists at Shaw University to combat discrimination against people of color. SNCC started at a university and grew into one of the major organizations during the civil rights era. During the Vietnam War, the Ohio National Guardsmen shot four students, protesting the bombing of Cambodia by the U.S. These are two major political movements that were started on college campuses and made real world impact not just in America but inspired other student protests at universities around the world. Now, in 2018, political activism and social reform has made its way back to campuses with student-led chapters of #BLM popping up on campuses. In addition to #BLM chapters, many student organizations such as the Young Democratic Socialists, M.O.V.E., and hundreds of others are classified as political action groups. The purpose of these organizations is to spread the word about issues happening in the local and national area to students and impact change on and off campus through student activism and service. These groups often host on-campus protests, voter registration tables, town-halls, and collaborate with one another to create social reform at their respective universities.

According to a report from the Anti-Defamation League, racist fliers, banners and stickers were found on college campuses 147 times in fall 2017, a more than threefold increase over the 41 cases reported one year before. The University of Texas at San

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

Antonio is no exception to this statistic. The appearance of flyers and banners from White nationalist groups have become more frequent on campus. As a way to proclaim diversity and inclusion as part of the campus culture, the university released statements from the President's Office condemning these acts, raised banners around campus embracing diversity, and reaffirmed the school's founding principles of inclusion and acceptance of all students' inherent differences.

With this overflow of diversity rhetoric, one is left to question whether or not the populations in which this message is supposed to ring true, actually identify with the overall message and believe it was given genuinely by the school administration. This major influx of welcoming language towards students of color leaves one to question why the pressure to make diverse students seem safe rather than emphasizing disciplining those who produce dangerous situations and environments for students of color. How does the construction of this mindset impact the mindset and self perceptions of the multicultural students that the university is trying so hard to protect? Do these students identify with the university's values and feel included in these spaces or do they feel like a target of a diversity program or a token within the institution?

Literature Review

In Crenshaw's (1997) essay relating rhetorical silence to whiteness, it was found that whiteness has created a rhetoric that is non self-reflexive and contains many silent agendas and hidden meanings within its composition. An example of these hidden meanings and silent agendas would be rhetoric associated with the Confederate flag. To a Black American, the rhetoric of the Confederate flag speaks of slavery, exclusion, violence, and racism. Crenshaw emphasizes that "rhetoricians must do the critical

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

ideological work necessary to make whiteness visible and overturn its silences for the purpose of resisting racism.” Certain words or phrases--or in this case symbols--effectively silence the opinions and thoughts of entire populations of people. The public political rhetoric of whiteness depends on a “silent” denial of white privilege. This serves as a way to justify the racist decisions made on the judicial, legislative, and executive levels all at the expense of the Black and Brown population of America. Rhetorical silence is more apparent in topics such as gender, race, and class because more often than not, those in power choose specific rhetorics and narratives with the sole purpose of silencing minority populations. Crenshaw says, “Rhetorical silence protects the invisibility of whiteness because it both reflects and sustains the assumption that to be white is the ‘natural condition,’ the assumed norm.” The language used in America and the ideologies behind hegemonic narratives effectively maintain both the forced silence of people of color and the imposed silence safeguarding White people’s refusal to acknowledge their privilege.

Tompkins (2009) relates rhetorical listening with moral sensitivity using the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. He defines rhetorical listening as the appearance of communication connections. Communication acts that make the listener feel recognized or present has the property of being “listened” to by the rhetoric. Tompkins says that those who are classified as “other” and are silenced only gain their presence, or gain the ability to listen, when they become apart of the connection. By recognizing the existence of these others, one can generate empathy and moral sensitivity. This moral sensitivity in rhetoric leads to the feeling of being listened to rather than silenced because their culture is being treated sensitively. When the others have a legitimate issues such as

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

discrimination in voting policies, but are secluded from a communication act such as political writings or the news that promote accountability and resolution regarding those issues, care about legitimate cultural concerns, experiences and exigencies are diminished. This shows the impact that can be made on individual and collective self perceptions. Without the sense of agency, these others will continue to be silenced and have a harder time making communication connections.

Methods

Participants, Design and Materials

The research presented here is based on qualitative methodologies. I specifically used the survey method to collect the bulk of my data. I sent out one that consisted of one multiple choice question and six open ended questions. Each piece of rhetoric (Roadrunner Creed and Beaks Up Speak Up) was presented and then had three supplementary questions following. I structured it this way so that the participant could evaluate each piece separately without influence from the answers from the previous set of questions. Two out of the six questions asked the participant how their organization is involved in furthering diversity so as to let me know how they see themselves in the realm of furthering diversity. I hoped that the organization members saw themselves as active and engaged in their campus community and working diligently to further diversity. The rest of the questions questioned the institutions role in expanding diversity and creating an environment that is safe for students of color. I hoped that the participants would put specific examples of university sponsored diversity programs so as to see what the students of color see from their university.

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

The participants of this study were random students who self identify as members of cultural organizations on campus. The presidents as well as their organization names were not revealed so as to protect their personal thoughts about the institution. The ten organizations chosen were picked based on their mission and vision statements including keywords surrounding culture, diversity, and social action. No personal identification was collected in order to make the data as varied as possible.

Each survey went to each president of a multicultural student organization. Ten surveys were distributed in total. (Each president then distributed the survey to their members). This participative survey method ensured members of the community had time to respond to the open ended questions, felt “safe” within the context of their organization so as to speak freely and rhetorically listen to each other, and reflect on their positionality within the context of the university. By employing this method of collecting data, I was able to collect responses that accurately reflect the populations both who embody the founding diversity tenets of the university and who are most impacted by diversity policies and programs on campus.

Results

I was looking for the effectiveness of diversity rhetorics (Roadrunner Creed and Beaks Up Speak Up) on multicultural students involved in cultural organizations. I was hoping to get a clear distinction between the students view on their place in furthering diversity (whether or not they feel a sense of agency), and how and where they see their own institution furthering diversity. If a large number of students of color feel that their institution is not moving fast enough to offer them resources, and that they have to take

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

matters into their own hands, there is a disconnect between the diversity rhetoric and the student body. Also, is students fail to easily recognize university sponsored diversity programming, but the university is saying that there is an abundance of programming and resources available to students, there is yet again another disconnect.

Roadrunner Creed

When asked how does their organization implement diversity, many of the organization members answered, “collaborating with other organizations and respecting one another.” When asked where they see diversity on campus as an organization, answers were “maybe once somewhere”; “NAACP, “I see in in our organizations”, and seeing it in other organizations and all over campus. As seen in **Figure 1 (see appendix)**, 42.9% of participants resonate with the diversity and inclusion aspect of the creed, while the other 57.2% resonated with the active engagement and academic scholarship portions of the creed.

Beaks Up Speak Up

When asked how the organization members implement bystander intervention in their organizations, the results were that some did not see bystander intervention at all or did not know what it was, others had direct contact with the police department, and others “watched out for one another” as a means of bystander intervention. The results for where the organization members see bystander intervention on campus were that they see it in students, the classroom, through organizations, and sometimes not at all. Finally when asked which part of the Beaks Up Speak Up initiative they most resonated with their personal idea of UTSA, most chose “recognizing a potentially harmful situation or

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

interaction and choosing to respond in a way that could positively influence the outcome.”

Discussion

Individuality vs. Whole

All of the participants distinguished their organization as one that embodies diversity and inclusion and are pioneers in their respective communities. When asked how their organization implements diversity, all began to list examples like “going out to other communities” or “we respect one another” as ways that the organizations personify diversity and create a communal identity. When asked how they see the university implement diversity and inclusion on campus, many also listed the same examples they had previously listed before. They also pointed out how other organizations on campus strive to further our diversity but none mentioned any university sponsored diversity and inclusion events or programs. This trend continued with all seven questions on the survey.

Students are associating their diversity within themselves rather than the institution. The university’s diversity rhetorics are silent in the way that the university’s position in increasing inclusivity is known to be scarce. These groups are increasing their listening by emphasizing these rhetorics amongst each other. They are taking a sense of agency to increase diversity themselves without the help of the university. The diversity rhetoric is being listened to by multicultural students, but carries a subconscious idea that the university has a physical silence on campus when it comes to furthering diversity. This pushes the student body to make sure that they implement diversity and inclusion themselves without the help of the university sponsored initiatives.

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

Limitations

The study was incomplete due to many factors. Due to new regulations and Spring Break, the approval of this study took seven weeks to approve. The initial timeline was in early February so as to catch the organization members during a busy time in the school year. The actual facilitation did not happen until April. During this time, organizations see major decreases in membership as well as member engagement, start to focus on transition of power and elections, and (as students more generally) are focusing on the completions of finals. Due to these reasons, seven out of the ten presidents could only generate one member response per their organization. The other three presidents were transitioning out and passed the task on to someone else who did not fulfil the previous agreement of completing the survey. Seven people do not accurately represent a sample size that reflects the large number of students of color and the large number of university sponsored student organizations. The conclusions from this data are part of this small scale study, but the responses and discussions do lend itself to further discussions of rhetorical listening and large scale analyses.

Conclusion

The use of diversity rhetoric at universities in order to combat hate is slowly becoming more apparent. West Texas. Administrators have to be strategic in how, when, and where they display these rhetorics to create a feeling of inclusivity amongst its diverse student population so students, who are people of color, actually feel embraced, supported, and acknowledged by the university. Otherwise, the student body will continue to have their own sense of agency in matters concerning their safety and level of

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

inclusion in creating university policies for discrimination and racism and see any action from the university as one of sabotage or deceit. If universities want to create a sense of safety and inclusion for these students, it is imperative that these students be included in decisions concerning consequences for hate crimes, diversity programming, and policies and are recognized for their efforts to help further their institution's goals for inclusion; thus, the university successfully moves to further diversity and acceptance amongst the student populations.

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

Appendix

UTSA Diversity Survey

I am currently conducting research on the various diversity statements made by UTSA. I have asked your organization because your mission statement and or values celebrates diversity and is reflected in your efforts on campus. I would like to get the opinion of diverse students such as yourselves in order to see if you identify with these statements and test their effectiveness. In a few moments a link to my survey will appear on the screen. The survey should take you no longer than five minutes. No identifying information will be collected so your participation in this study also includes your consent to participate. Thank you so much for participating in my research.

* Required

“As a Roadrunner, I will:

- (1) Uphold the highest standards of academic and personal integrity by practicing and expecting fair and ethical conduct;
- (2) Respect and accept individual differences, recognizing the inherent dignity of each person;
- (3) Contribute to campus life and the larger community through my active engagement; and
- (4) Support the fearless exploration of dreams and ideas in the advancement of ingenuity, creativity, and discovery.

Guided by these principles Now and forever, I am a Roadrunner!”

[\(https://roadrunnerdays.utsa.edu/creed-alma-mater-fight-song/\)](https://roadrunnerdays.utsa.edu/creed-alma-mater-fight-song/)

- 1) How does your organization implement the creed? *

Your answer

- 2) Where do you see the creed being implemented on campus, as a student? As an organization? *

Your answer

- 3) What part of the creed best resonates with your idea of UTSA? *

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

“A Message from VPSA - Sam Gonzales

In January 2015, The University of Texas System held a gathering with representatives from the majority of their institutions to discuss a three year grant that would be provided to each university. The grant was designed to help each campus establish a culture of care where bystanders would not stand idly by when trouble reared its ugly head, but rather would choose to intervene for one another.

What is Bystander Intervention?

The UT System's definition of Bystander Intervention is recognizing a potentially harmful situation or interaction and choosing to respond in a way that could positively influence the outcome.” (<http://www.utsa.edu/beaksup/about.html>)

How does your organization implement Bystander Intervention?

Your answer

Where do you see Bystander intervention being implemented as a student? As an organization?

Your answer

What part of the Beaks Up Speak Up initiative best resonates with your idea of UTSA? Please copy and paste the sentence(s) into the text box.

Your answer

3) What part of the creed best resonates with your idea of UTSA?

7 responses

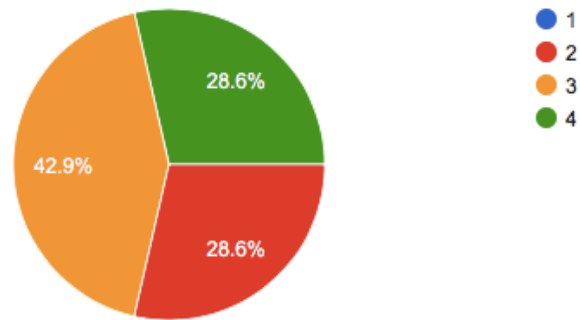


Figure 1

RHETORICAL SILENCE AND RHETORICAL LISTENING

References

Crenshaw, C. (1997). Resisting whiteness' rhetorical silence. *Western Journal of Communication*, 61(3), 253.

Paula S. Tompkins (2009) Rhetorical Listening and Moral Sensitivity, *The Intl. Journal of Listening*, 23:1, 60-79, DOI: 10.1080/10904010802591912