

# Boxing Plato's Shadow

## An Introduction to the Study of Human Communication

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# Introduction

## Studying Communication

Robert Gunderson, a venerable communication scholar and teacher, once described communication study as a “discipline of refugees.” He observed that many communication scholars began their careers intending to be something else—psychologists, sociologists, literary critics, or historians. Like Dr. Gunderson, the authors find it ironic that communication is a second choice of subjects for so many scholars, for it would be hard to find a human activity more ubiquitous and more essential than communicating. Research tells us that about 75 percent of the average person’s day involves some form of communication. One estimate suggests that “we listen a book a day, speak a book a week, read the equivalent of a book a month, and write the equivalent of a book a year” (Buckley, 1992). Communication is a primary means of meeting our needs and accomplishing our goals. We communicate to share information, ideas, and feelings; to influence one another; to coordinate activity; to build relationships; to acquire goods and services; to entertain and express ourselves; and to create and sustain the cultures that enable us to prosper in civilized communities. Another way to say “humans are *social* animals” is to say “humans are *communicating* animals.”

How *well* we communicate matters, probably more than how *much*. Individuals, organizations, and communities who communicate effectively have an evolutionary advantage over those who fail to communicate as well; they get better results. That is why communication skills are listed as primary in virtually every contemporary study of job skills (Daily, 1999; Floyd & Gordon, 1998) and why they

are recognized as critical in job roles ranging from entry-level to executive officer positions. Based on surveys of employers, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2002) ranks communication skills first on its list of "top ten qualities" employers seek in candidates. Honesty ranks second. It's not surprising, then, that, when 1000 college faculty members from a variety of academic disciplines were asked what skills every college graduate would need, they placed communication at the very top of the list (Morreale & Vogl, 1998). Better communication helps us succeed and prosper in our enterprises and in our personal relationships. And better understanding of the processes and functions of communication enables us to communicate more effectively.

Given the crucial link between better communication and a better life, communication has been a subject of serious study in many cultures throughout recorded history. The first book on this subject is almost as old as writing itself. Around 2675 B.C., an Egyptian named Ptah Hotep offered advice on communication in a book called *Precepts*, which he used in his role as instructor to the Pharaoh's sons (Reinard, 1998). His book served for centuries as a textbook for Egyptians. In the Bible, Jesus teaches an important lesson about communication through the parable of the "sower of seeds," suggesting that, although it is the speaker's responsibility to state the truth, it is up to the hearer to receive and heed it (Peters, 1999). The Koran clearly addresses human communication, instructing people to make their messages true and straightforward (Ali, 1996). In ancient China, advice on effective, appropriate communication could be found in the Lao-Tzu. In the early fifteenth century, Seami, a Japanese author, advised that the ultimate goal of discourse "lies in a grace of language and complete mastery of the speech of the nobility and gentry, so that even the most casual utterance will be graceful" (Zeuschner, 1997).

Today the study of human communication is an important academic discipline that investigates the ways people relate to and affect one another through the messages they send and receive. It is a thriving and growing enterprise, encompassing thousands of scholars and research on every aspect of human communication from the most intimate interpersonal interactions to the broadest effects of mass media. Professional associations of communication scholars have formed at the international, national, regional, and state levels. At annual conferences, members of these associations gather to share and discuss their findings. More than 30 academic journals focus on com-

munication research. What is learned from this research builds the knowledge base for educating students and training professionals across multiple disciplines.

In the midst of this thriving academic and professional activity, there exists an intriguing paradox. Despite the centrality of communication among human behaviors, the long history of communication study in Western civilization, and the vitality of communication research today, the discipline faces a continuing struggle for recognition as a legitimate academic pursuit separate from other disciplines. Despite the obvious importance of communication in accomplishing organizational and community objectives, communication specialists often face a similar struggle for recognition of their substantial contributions to collective goals.

This recognition problem is due in part to the fact that, although communication has been studied and taught for 2500 years, the focus of communication study has shifted and its name has changed over time. From the time of the ancient Greeks until the eighteenth century, the study of communication focused primarily on the art of persuading others through speech and was called *rhetoric*. During the nineteenth century, Europeans and Americans sought to build their ability to speak gracefully and effectively by studying what they called *elocution*, emphasizing voice, diction, and gesture. In the early twentieth century, teachers of public speaking sought to distinguish their discipline from English by focusing on spoken communication and calling their discipline *speech*. The word *communication*, as we understand and use it today, was introduced into English vocabulary by John Locke in 1690 (Peters, 1999), but the use of this term to name the discipline did not become common until about 1960. Thus, although the discipline has a long history and deep roots in Western civilization, it has evolved slowly, has traveled under a variety of labels, and only recently has acquired its current name. We can understand, then, why communication is perceived by some as a new discipline, one that has yet to delineate clearly its subject matter and boundaries.

A second reason communication must struggle for recognition is that communication scholars study a *process* that cuts across many other disciplines. Aspects of the communication process are studied by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, political scientists, theologians, clinical and social psychologists, health educators, and organizational theorists. Within their fields, these scholars study communication under such subject areas as sociolinguistics, homiletics, marital

interaction, and public relations, just to name a few. Because it is a ubiquitous, ongoing process that is integral to human interaction, communication is difficult to define in simple terms separate from the subject matter of other disciplines.

A third reason the study of communication may be viewed as having dubious value is that humans can use communication to deceive and exploit one another, just as surely as they can use it to share truth and build community. It was this susceptibility to misuse that led Plato to argue forcefully against the teaching of rhetoric in ancient Athens and that often leads us to doubt the words of politicians or the integrity of attorneys today. Whatever the reasons, many scholars and professionals view communication study as marginal (Taylor, 1999). Thus, sooner or later, all communication scholars confront the need to explain their discipline and often to defend it.

One result of this paradoxical problem is that many scholars have taken up communication as a second or third career choice. In describing communication study as a discipline of refugees, Robert Gunderson spoke from experience. Over the course of his career, he guided 49 graduate students to their doctoral degrees (Ritter, 2001). "We came to this study," he said, "because there were important questions to answer about communication that we couldn't address adequately in our home disciplines" (Gunderson, 1968). Dr. Gunderson was talking about professional scholars more than 35 years ago, but a similar phenomenon occurs today when college students choose their major. Many students transfer to the discipline when they discover that, by studying communication, they can gain highly relevant knowledge and skills that they could not acquire in their original majors. Once engaged, they quickly see that communication is central to human interaction; that greater competence in communication means greater ability to meet our own, our family's, and our community's needs; and that improved communication can mean improved quality of life. Robert Gunderson's key point was that the discipline of communication enables us to answer critically important questions about human communication and how we can improve it—questions that are not as effectively addressed in any other discipline.

If you are a newcomer to the discipline, welcome. You are entering a worthwhile and fascinating field of endeavor. The chapters that follow offer a basic orientation to the academic and professional discipline of communication by addressing several key questions:

- What are the roots of the discipline? Where did this study come from? How did it arrive at its current status? Why is a subject so central and important so underrecognized and misunderstood?
- What are some of the fundamental concepts that guide efforts to understand and improve human communication?
- What methods do scholars use to produce new knowledge about human communication? What kinds of things do communication scholars study?

Today communication is studied as a central force in contemporary life, but the concept of communication has evolved as an outcome of 2500 years of thought, study, and practice. It is an idea we have *inherited*, shaped over the centuries by changing political and social conditions and by technological advances. To appreciate and comprehend fully the study of human communication, one must know the story of how it came to be what it is. That story begins in ancient Athens with a very practical problem and a group of teachers known as sophists, as discussed in Chapter 1.

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# Chapter 1

## The Beginning of Communication Study

Athens reached the peak of its economic and military prominence during the fifth century B.C. Arguably the strongest and wealthiest of Greek city-states, Athens had merchant ships trading throughout the Mediterranean basin, a great navy, a powerful army, magnificent structures, and beautiful art. The great Athenian legacy that concerns us, however, resulted not from the city's power or its beauty but from two important innovations in its governance: the adversary system of justice and democracy. These two developments gave advantages to citizens who could communicate effectively and, thus, led to the study of communication.

The *adversary system* was invented by the ancient Greeks as an alternative to fighting among themselves. In the adversary system, when two citizens found themselves in a dispute over property or some perceived offense, they would agree in advance to let a respected third party serve as judge. Each of the disputing parties would argue his case before a judge, who, based upon his evaluation of the merits of their arguments, would decide how the dispute should be settled. In settling conflicts among citizens, this approach amounted to replacing violent physical combat with verbal combat, which was an obvious improvement. Over time this approach was formalized into a court system and extended to apply to judging the guilt or innocence of persons accused of crimes. Although in subsequent centuries various states have added and improved details, the adversary system remains the best available judicial process.



*Democracy* was adopted as a replacement for tyranny in Athens during the sixth century B.C. Tyranny is the form of governance in which a single ruler has absolute, unquestioned authority over everything. With a wise and beneficent ruler, tyranny can be tolerable; with a bad tyrant, it is terribly oppressive. Thus, under the leadership of Solon and Cleisthenes, Athens instituted reforms, adopting a system of government in which citizens assembled and made decisions by majority vote. Thereafter the Athenian Assembly debated and decided by voting on such matters as making official appointments, passing laws, declaring war, and accepting a proposed peace treaty. This was democracy in an embryonic form. Only a small minority of the Athenian population—male citizens—participated. Women were forbidden to speak publicly and to vote. Noncitizen merchants, traders, professionals, and ambassadors were excluded, as were slaves. Despite these limitations, the ancient Athenians invented and began to apply the ideal of democratic governance. They provided the conceptual foundations for the fully developed democracy we enjoy today, and they began the practice of having ordinary citizens participate in government.

## **A Market for Communication Knowledge and Skill**

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In Athenian courts, citizens were required to advocate cases for themselves, and citizens spoke for themselves in the Assembly. The ability to speak persuasively was thus a skill that one needed to function as an Athenian citizen. Moreover, people who were more skilled in speaking than others had an obvious advantage. They won court cases and thereby acquired more wealth; they also acquired position, status, and power by being impressive and influential in the Assembly. Success in public speaking became a means to greater wealth, status, and power. As Athenian citizens sought to improve their speaking ability, they created an obvious market for knowledge and skills in public speaking. Since these skills had monetary and status value, Athenians were willing to pay for them.

## **The Sophists**

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The systematic study of communication began in Athens during the fifth century B.C. in response to the market for communication knowl-

edge and skill. Persons who studied and taught persuasive public speaking were known as *sophists*. They called this subject *rhetoric*. The term *sophist* had been used in Athens since the sixth century B.C. to refer to learned men, wise men, poets, and teachers (Barrett, 1987). Most sophists charged fees for their services.

Most early sophists were foreigners in Athens, ambassadors or traveling teachers from other cities. They taught a broad range of subjects in addition to rhetoric, offering a curriculum “designed to teach the Greek ideal of *arete*: the knowledge and attitude of effective participation in domestic, social, and political life” (Barrett, 1987). Sophists believed that all reasonably intelligent persons can become knowledgeable and acquire the skills to speak well—a view that offended some older, more traditional and elitist Athenians who clung to the belief that one’s destiny is predetermined at birth. It is important to remember that, in their study and teaching of rhetoric, sophists focused primarily on *public* speaking, which occurred primarily in the Assembly or the court, and in which only male Athenian citizens were permitted to engage. Focusing on skills for which there was a market, they addressed only one aspect of the broad subject of communication and they served only a privileged few. Still, they launched the study of rhetoric and originated some of the most fundamental concepts of communication. Several sophists contributed particularly important insights into rhetoric, which have endured and continue to influence the study and practice of communication.

*Corax* (who is most probably a legendary or composite figure) is credited with inventing the study of rhetoric, with identifying the different parts of a speech, and with defining the concept of probability. *Corax* recognized that there are many matters about which we cannot be certain but about which we can make rational judgments concerning what is most probably true. He thus provided a basis for treating argument and persuasion not merely as ways of advocating what we believe to be *certainly* true but also as ways of discovering what is *probably* true (Cohen, 1994).

*Protagoras* built upon the concept of probability and contributed the important idea that there are two sides to every argument. *Protagoras* suggested that the “truth” of one side should be tested by the “truth” of the other and that advocates for each side have the burden of proving their side stronger (Barrett, 1987). For his contribution, *Protagoras* is credited with being the “father of debate” (Cohen, 1994).

*Gorgias* showed that public speeches can excite and inspire people. Admired for his beautiful style in the use of language, he focused

on oratory that bordered on poetry and taught that, through great oratory, one can “stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture piety” (Barrett, 1987). Gorgias also appears to have developed the concept of *kairos*, which states that speakers should adapt their oratory to suit the audience and the occasion (Barrett, 1987).

*Hippias* advocated that speakers must be broadly knowledgeable, able to answer all questions about a subject. He taught that it is necessary to keep acquiring new knowledge throughout one’s life and to be focused on ways to remember what one has learned, so that knowledge can be used to answer questions and build arguments (Cohen, 1994). In a famous debate with Socrates, Hippias argued that it is important to always have new things to say on a subject, whereas Socrates countered that truth is eternal and that it is more important to speak the same enduring truths consistently (Barrett, 1987).

During the fourth century B.C., *Isocrates* brought together much of the teaching of fifth century B.C. sophists. An important teacher of rhetoric, he is thought to have significantly influenced the rhetorical thought of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (Kennedy, 1963).

The sophists not only began the systematic study of communication but also brought about major advances in Greek thought. They challenged the older Athenian beliefs that human lives are predetermined reenactments of archetypal events that have already occurred among the gods. They advocated the revolutionary idea that humans are decision-making creatures who can affect their own environment and their personal and community fortunes and can influence one another by communicating effectively. They proposed that probable truth can be pursued by testing ideas in debate. They advanced the profoundly democratic idea that *every citizen can and should* learn to speak well and become influential (Barrett, 1987). And they taught that developing the skills and knowledge needed for citizenship is the duty of each citizen. The fundamental concepts and skills provided by the sophists made democracy possible. The practical study of rhetoric, which they developed, became a central subject in education curricula and remained so for more than 2000 years.

Yet the terms *sophist* and *sophistry* are used today with disdain. Given the important contributions made by the sophists to the development of Greek thought, to Western civilization, and to the study of human communication, it seems oddly paradoxical that they and their subject are held today in such low esteem. This paradox is at least somewhat understandable when we consider that skill in communication in general, and persuasion in particular, can be used to

deceive as well as to inform. In every era of history, there have been persons who have deceived and manipulated others through communication. Con artists and demagogues make a point of becoming effective persuaders, using every known rhetorical device to achieve their ends, so, for many people, being persuaded becomes associated with being fooled, misled, deceived, or defrauded.

In ancient Athens, some sophists were less ethical than those discussed in this section. Some went so far as to claim that truth does not matter, only effective persuasive technique. The reputations of the sophists, and of the study of rhetoric, suffered accordingly. But the facts that communication can be used for either good or ill and that some sophists were unethical do not fully explain the negative public image still carried by rhetoric in particular—and by the study of communication in general. The influence of the great philosopher Plato is a significant additional factor.

## Plato's Shadow

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To understand Plato's hostility toward the sophists and their work, we need to know about conditions in Athens in Plato's time. During the fifth century B.C., military and economic success changed Athens from a close-knit city-state whose citizens shared coherent beliefs and values into a cosmopolitan metropolis populated by diverse people who spoke different languages, held various beliefs, and practiced a wide variety of customs. Foreigners brought to Athens attractive new ideas and goods, many of which challenged old Athenian ideas and customs. Some Athenians viewed these changes as corruptions of their pure beliefs and values; they longed for, and advocated returning to, Athens' older values and simpler ways. When Athens began to lose battles and wealth during the fourth century B.C., these conservatives attributed their city's decline to its straying from traditional values under the influence of foreigners. Sophists who offered new ideas were controversial in Athens because they were seen by many as subverting traditional Athenian beliefs (Barrett, 1987).

In democratic, cosmopolitan Athens, Socrates was an unsettling voice. He challenged not traditional Athenian beliefs but the newer ideas and mores associated with democratic governance that had taken hold in the fifth century B.C. (Smith, 1998). Uncomfortable with governance by a majority of ordinary men who were not particularly learned or wise, he sought to limit movement toward expanded

democracy. He was suspicious of attempts by people to persuade one another, which formed the basis of the new democratic process. Consistent with ancient Athenian mythology, Socrates believed Truth (with a capital *T*) to be absolute and permanent, set for all time by the actions of the gods. Believing that humans are to seek Truth by going inside themselves, he sought to help individuals discover Truth not by persuading them but only by asking questions during dialogues.

Socrates rarely made speeches or presented arguments; rather, he professed to know very little. He preferred and taught a more interactive way of communicating, asking challenging questions that provoked deeper thought on the part of his hearers. His method of drawing out, or "educing," truths from his students, is still applied; today it is called the Socratic method. And the Greek word *educe*, which means to draw out, is the root of the English word *education*.

Socrates preferred to think of communication as a profound, intimate enacting of relationship between two persons. He objected to the use of writing, because the writer cannot control who will read the message or when or where it will be read. Compared with his ideal of intimate communication, Socrates viewed rhetoric as, at best, a base pursuit (Peters, 1999).

Socrates' most influential follower was Plato. Like Socrates, Plato opposed democracy on the fundamental grounds that Truth is fixed and should be systematically sought by philosophers. The uncertainties of a democratic process, in which decisions are based on how a majority of Assembly members might be influenced by a speaker's persuasive efforts, appeared to Plato to be a recipe for disaster. The central point in his great work, *The Republic*, is his claim that the best government would be one in which the best philosopher rules as king. Plato was uncomfortable with the idea that ordinary citizens should presume to advocate or to participate in governmental decision making (Kennedy, 1963; Smith, 1998).

In keeping with his views on truth and democracy, Plato viewed the sophists and their ideas as harmful influences in Athens, and he sought to discredit them. He did not distinguish between good and bad sophists; he painted them all with the same dark brush. He objected to the sophists' teachings of rhetoric on the grounds that they favored style over substance and valued technique more than truth. Plato assigned rhetoric a subordinate place among the arts to be studied, describing it as a utilitarian craft, about equal to cookery in difficulty or complexity, one that might be used by philosophers to help explain truths to ordinary citizens (Kennedy, 1963; Plato, 370 B.C./1937). In assigning this

lesser role to rhetoric, Plato launched a philosophical dispute about the placement of communication study among academic pursuits that would continue for centuries. The adversary system and the democratic process gave persuasive speaking (and therefore rhetoric) a direct role in the effort to discover what is most probably true. Plato rejected the notion that people should base decisions on anything less than philosophically certain Truth, and he reserved the task of discovering truth for philosophers. The disputed issue, then, is this: Does rhetoric have a legitimate part to play in the *discovery of truth*, or is rhetoric useful only to *help explain truth after it has been discovered*? As we begin the 21st century, this issue, still hotly debated, has been broadened to encompass the communication process in general.

Advocating philosophical pursuit of universal Truth, Plato cast Socrates in his written dialogues as the ethical inquirer in contrast to the unethical sophists (Smith, 1998). Plato's attacks on the sophists were self-serving, since he operated a school, charged fees for instruction, and was in direct competition with the sophists for students. It is also interesting to note (as Cicero did) that Plato used Socrates in his written dialogues as a potent *rhetorical device* to advance his persuasive arguments against rhetoric and the sophists—a strategy that enacted some of the very behaviors to which he was objecting. Nevertheless, Plato was sufficiently convincing in his attacks on rhetoric and the sophists that he succeeded in casting a permanent dark shadow over their reputations.

In later centuries, both Christian and Islamic scholars, who believed in divine inspiration and accepted the authority of scripture, would find Plato's stance regarding the limited usefulness of rhetoric compatible with their beliefs. Divine Truth for them was not to be discovered through persuasion or debate; it was revealed and was to be accepted on faith. In modern times, secular scholars, especially scientists who are devoted to the ideal of achieving certainty through disciplined systematic research, would identify with Plato's insistence on the pursuit of *certain* truth. For them the messy vagaries of rhetoric would epitomize the kind of thinking science was invented to overcome. Thus, over time, both religious and secular scholars have tended to share Plato's low opinion of rhetoric.

## Aristotle's Resolution

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Aristotle studied, taught, and wrote about literally every subject known to the ancient Greeks. He saw merit in both Plato's and the

sophists' positions concerning the study of rhetoric, and he applied himself to discovering ways to reconcile the two opposing views (Aristotle, 350 B.C./1991). Although he respected and admired Plato and served as an instructor in Plato's school, Aristotle differed with his great mentor on several key issues.

Whereas Plato sought Truth as a philosopher, using reasoning and dialogue to "draw out" knowledge and understanding, Aristotle sought to understand his natural and social environment as a scientist would, by observing systematically. He has been called the first true empiricist because he practiced systematic observation, using the senses; then applied logic to his observations to form conclusions about nature and about people. According to Socrates and Plato, Truth resides within the person and is to be discovered by being drawn out. According to Aristotle, Truth is all around in the environment and is to be taken in through the senses.

For matters about which certain knowledge was attainable, Aristotle invented *formal logic*. Perhaps Aristotle's greatest contribution to civilization, logic guides thoughts to sure conclusions. It consists of *syllogisms*, in which specific claims based on observation are combined with known universal principles to draw conclusions. Whereas Plato's devotion to the pursuit of Truth provided the ideal for academic scholarship, Aristotle's empirical perspective and system of logic provided the fundamental methods for pursuing that ideal.

The key point on which Aristotle differed from Plato and agreed with the sophists was his observation that, in many areas of life, certainty is not attainable. In these areas, humans can at best ascertain only "probable" truth. He recognized that most decisions in matters of state rest not on certainties but on these relative probabilities. In the absence of the information needed to draw conclusions with certainty, important decisions are made on the basis of judgments about what is most probable (Aristotle, 350 B.C./1991). On matters for which only probable truth can be ascertained, Aristotle recognized persuasion and advocacy, the tools of the sophists' trade, as valid decision-making tools. He observed that persuasive advocacy, in fact, influences decisions in both the courts and the Assembly. Agreeing with Protagoras, he reasoned that, on matters for which certainty cannot be reached, advocacy and debate are the best available means of discovering what is most probably true (Aristotle, 350 B.C./1991).

Based on his observations, Aristotle also differed from his master about the ethics of studying and teaching rhetoric as a way to discover truths. Plato viewed rhetoric as suspect because it can be used

to promote falsehood over truth and, thus, steered honorable men away from it. Aristotle, on the other hand, saw that rhetoric can be used to promote either falsehood *or* truth, and he concluded that it is the *duty* of honorable citizens to arm themselves with knowledge and skill in rhetoric in order to defend truth (Aristotle, 350 B.C./1991). He reasoned that truth is naturally easier to defend than falsehood. Thus, he argued, if honorable men are well armed with rhetorical skills, they should always be able to prevail over the advocates of falsehood. If good men fail to develop rhetorical skill, he said, they will have only themselves to blame when falsehood prevails (Aristotle, 350 B.C./1932). Based on this rationale, Aristotle studied and taught rhetoric. He drew upon many of the ideas of the sophists, added useful concepts of his own, and developed a complete system of rhetoric. Aristotle's system was laid out in his *Rhetoric*, which is recognized as the most complete of all ancient works on the subject and which provided the starting point for most twentieth-century study of persuasive communication. Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the art of discovering all the available means of persuasion in a given situation" (Aristotle, 350 B.C./1991). He carefully distinguished rhetoric from dialectic, assigning each subject specific functions: Whereas dialectic uses the precise construction of logical syllogisms, rhetoric is accomplished through a somewhat looser form of reasoning. He called these softer forms of reasoning *enthymemes*. Enthymemes differ from strict syllogisms in two ways: (1) They rely on premises that are generally or probably true, rather than on premises that must be certainly and universally True, and (2) parts of the argument are often left unspoken and filled in mentally by the audience.

Many of the basic concepts that frame and guide the contemporary study of human communication were articulated by Aristotle in *Rhetoric*:

- Communication is "purposive." That is, people communicate with the *intention* of affecting or influencing others, and communication efforts can be evaluated on the basis of whether they succeed; if so, how; and, if not, why not.
- Communication efforts (oratory) can be categorized by purpose and situation into three types: *Forensic oratory* is speaking in the courts as an adversary; *Deliberative oratory* is speaking in the Assembly to influence a decision; *Epideictic oratory* is speaking at a ceremony on a special occasion to inspire listeners.



- Persuasion is accomplished through a combination of three kinds of appeals:
  - Ethos* (personal appeal of the speaker; today we call this *source credibility*)
  - Logos* (logical support provided by the speaker; today we call this *argument*)
  - Pathos* (emotional appeal, the stimulating of an emotional response in the audience)

In observing that persuasion is affected not only by reason but also by the credibility of the speaker's character and emotions of the audience, Aristotle made it clear that persuasion is both a logical and a psychological process.

- Learning to speak effectively is a matter of developing five skills:
  - Invention* is the ability to generate the ideas needed to be persuasive in a given situation.
  - Disposition* is the ability to organize the ideas for maximum impact.
  - Style* is the ability to use language appropriately in any situation.
  - Memory* is the ability to remember facts and ideas.
  - Delivery* is the ability to speak in a clear, strong voice and with effective gestures.

These skills were later used by the great Roman teacher of rhetoric, Quintilian, to structure his instructions on rhetoric and came to be known as the "five canons of rhetoric" (Clarke, 1953).

During Aristotle's lifetime, Greece was conquered by King Philip of Macedon. Drafted into the service of King Philip, Aristotle was appointed to serve as teacher to Philip's son, Alexander. Aristotle exercised considerable influence on young Alexander, whom we now know as Alexander the Great. Alexander took copies of Aristotle's works along on his conquest of the then known world and had them translated into the Arabic and Persian languages. Almost two centuries later, when the Romans conquered Greece, they were eager to acquire Greek knowledge. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the writings of the sophists served as key sources of rhetorical understanding for Cicero, Rome's greatest orator, and later for Quintilian, who taught rhetoric in Rome (Clarke, 1953). For most of the next 2000 years, rhetoric was treated as one of the funda-

mental arts that all educated persons were expected to know. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* inspired nineteenth-century English rhetoricians George Campbell, Richard Whately, and Hugh Blair (Smith, 1998). And, in twentieth-century American universities, the *Rhetoric* became the cornerstone of the academic discipline of speech communication.

Aristotle provided a foundation for the study of human communication, but his work did not fully dispel the suspicions about *rhetoric* that Plato had raised. To this day, the term *rhetoric* is often used to refer to hollow persuasive messages lacking substance and containing pretentious language. *Sophistry* is understood to mean specious argument or the tricky use of style to deceive an audience. Sophists still are generally regarded as shallow thinkers and mercenaries who lack a moral compass, in contrast to Socrates, who is viewed as a highly ethical martyr to his beliefs. Plato's negative portrayal of rhetoric and its teachers in his dialogue, *Gorgias*, still rings true for readers. Twenty-five hundred years later, the shadow Plato cast over the study of persuasive communication persists.

### Boxing Plato's Shadow

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When we look at the early history of communication study, we discover the roots of communication's public relations problem. Among these are the excesses of some sophists, Plato's condemnation of the study of rhetoric, and the ensuing philosophical dispute over the place of rhetoric in the pursuit of truth. It is important also to recognize that Plato was not entirely wrong in the position he took. There is a "dark side" to communication, which was exemplified by some of the sophists; communication can be, and often is, used to deceive as well as to inform. A line in an old Woody Guthrie song says, "Some rob you with a six gun, some with a fountain pen." In democracies there will always be demagogues and crooked politicians who work at perfecting the art of the lie. There will always be con artists who use communication skillfully to victimize people who trust them. Sharing their expertise in communication with demagogues and con artists, legitimate communication practitioners and scholars may always be tainted by a bit of suspicion. Despite this drawback, communication scholars and teachers support Aristotle's position that good people have a responsibility to learn the mechanisms of persuasion to ensure that truth will prevail. Scholars in our field promote the responsible study of communication by honorable people.

Many years ago, as a young college professor, one of the authors of this book, Michael Dues, spent a heated hour on a September afternoon arguing with a film instructor about the value of teaching students rhetorical sensitivity and skills. The film instructor disapproved, on ethical grounds, of Michael's teaching argumentation and coaching debate. Michael defended his profession, but his arguments seemed not to move the film instructor at all. The instructor cited Plato and Socrates, holding that Truth must be educed, or drawn out, of students by asking challenging questions. Michael cited Aristotle. Driving home that evening, thinking about the afternoon's discussion, Michael realized that he had not been arguing with his contemporary colleague as much as he had been doing battle with the old shadow Plato had cast over the study of rhetoric. The image came to mind of shadow boxing—punching at thin air the way boxers do in practice, striking nothing because the opponent isn't really there. Michael felt that he had spent the afternoon boxing Plato's shadow. Ever since that day, when he is required to explain or defend the communication discipline, the image of boxing Plato's shadow returns.

## **Contributions of Plato and Socrates to the Study of Communication**

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In highlighting Socrates' and Plato's opposition to the teaching of rhetoric, we should not overlook their significant contributions to the understanding of human communication. Rhetoric, after all, is only one aspect of communication, and one unfortunate consequence of rhetoric's occupying a central place in education for so many centuries may have been that a broader and deeper understanding of communication has not been more effectively pursued. From a twentieth-century perspective, John Durham Peters (1999) has pointed out that Socrates provided a significant addition to the idea of communication. Socrates offered a valuable ideal in viewing communication as an act of intimate relationship and reciprocity, resulting in the discovery and appreciation of truth and beauty. Socrates saw great value in communication aimed at simply sharing truth, without seeking personal gain. Plato also added greatly to the understanding of human communication by describing the limits of rhetoric's value and its potential for misuse. Even Plato's shadow is an important contribution; it reminds

us that communication is a powerful tool that can be used for good or ill. Plato's shadow prods us to be ethical communicators.

## Summary

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In ancient Greece the invention of the adversary system and the advent of democratic government gave advantages to citizens who could become skillful at persuasive communication. In response to this market the sophists developed the study of rhetoric and began teaching the art of persuasion. Plato condemned the sophists' teaching of rhetoric, arguing that rhetoric aimed not to seek the Truth, but only to persuade. Plato insisted that people should seek to discover Truth by means of philosophical reasoning and claimed that teachers could help only by asking questions, which caused students to draw out answers from inside themselves. Aristotle saw that the Assembly and the courts made decisions based on facts that were observed and on arguments presented by advocates. He recognized that such decisions cannot be made on the basis of any certain or universal Truths, but must be made on the basis of judgments about what is most probably true. For making these judgments he concluded that persuasion is useful and appropriate. Viewing rhetoric as an important tool that can be used for both good and evil, he concluded that honorable citizens should learn the art of persuasion so that they could always defend truth. Therefore, Aristotle studied and taught rhetoric. Aristotle's ideas about rhetoric form the foundation of the systematic study of communication, which has remained an important area of scholarship throughout the history of Western civilization. But Plato's castigation of rhetoric, combined with the fact that persuasive communication continues to be used to deceive, as well as to inform or to help people, placed the study under a permanent shadow of suspicion.

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