PERFORMING THE PUBLIC WORK OF RHETORIC: ENGAGING
DIFFERENCE AND SUPPORTING AGENCY THROUGH
COMMUNITY-BASED PERFORMANCE AND DELIBERATIVE COMMUNITY
FORUMS

In this dissertation I present a multi-stage model for conducting the public work of rhetoric. This model
develops out of my study of the process employed to develop a community-based performance that
premiered as part of the region-wide celebration of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania’s 250th anniversary.

The public work of rhetoric is pursued through community-engaged research involving academics
collaborating with community partners as ‘citizen-scholars.’ Through their public work, rhetorical scholars
have sought to address questions such as how to promote inclusion, how to engage ‘the problem of
difference’ in just and generative ways, and how support the agency of individuals whose voices and
perspectives have historically been marginalized. The field of community-based performance seeks to
address similar questions by employing performance as a means to promote social change.

In the body of scholarship comprising the public work of rhetoric, more or less well-defined notions of
performance are invoked as a distinguishing feature. Responding to this attention to performance notions
and a challenge put forth by the rhetorical scholar Linda Flower, “...does one theorize, study, or teach about
performance or does one engage more directly in some form of theory-guided rhetorical practice” (2008, 86),
I sought to determine whether public engagement based in a specific performance theory and practice would
enable people to engage their differences as a resource and support the agency of individuals. Collaborating
with a diverse group of Anglo and Latino community partners, I helped produce a community-based
performance.

For a study of our collaborative process, I developed a social-cultural activity analysis. Social-cultural activity
analysis involves participant-observation of an ‘activity system,’ an analysis of the means employed to
mediate engagement (e.g., texts, tools, and practices), an analysis of the discourses that inform these means
and their use, and interviews with participants. Reflecting on the results of this study with a perspective
informed by work I have done to organize Deliberative Community Forums, I conclude that the process of
developing a community-based performance can engage difference as a resource and support the agency of
individuals; however, the performance itself is unlikely to do so unless means additional to the performance
are introduced to support the agency of those who attend as the audience.

Based on these results, I present a model for organizing deliberative public engagement. This model is
premised on a performance theory of public engagement, and is intended to support the emergence of a
particular type of rhetorical agency I find operating in these contexts of creative and deliberative
collaboration, which involves individuals taking actions that enable them to engage difference as a resource
by mutually affirming and supporting one another's agency.

Drawing into a generative relationship theories of deliberative democracy, public sphere studies, theater and
performance studies, and rhetorical scholarship, this dissertation can help inform the work of scholars and
artists engaged in community-based public work in a range of disciplines.