THE RHETORIC OF SITUATED ADVOCACY: DISABILITY ADVOCACY AND THE PRICE OF PERSUASION

This dissertation considers how ordinary advocates speak on behalf of others who are physiologically unable to speak or be heard on their own. Advocacy for people, causes, and ideas is foundational to rhetoric and writing studies. However, we know less about how and why different circumstances make advocacy a highly situated and personal practice. In fact, we often overlook many of the situated, embodied conditions that motivate and shape how people speak for others.

To address this need, this study unpacks the complexities of what I am calling “personally situated advocacy.” I explore how parents advocate for a disabled child within the context of special education in the US. I examine two special education controversies in which parent advocates disagree strongly with their school districts’ decisions over appropriate educational services for their children. Parents in both cases take rhetorical action that incites local conflict, and even national controversy, but does not lead to the outcomes they seek. Using rhetorical and discourse analysis, I show how conflicting personal, political, and historical forces create complex rhetorical challenges. Specifically, these analyses highlight how parents’ personal, often intense, commitment to their children clashes with the institutional norms of the education and legal systems. Successfully negotiating these tensions often requires enacting multiple and sophisticated rhetorical capabilities. However, most parent advocates have limited access to rhetorical resources. Furthermore, parents enacting these resources often bear hidden risks and labor. I argue that accessing the available means of persuasion for parent advocates can be psychosocially and materially costly, a feature of rhetorical engagement that merits more attention.