

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
COMMUNICATION  
THEORY

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## INVITATIONAL RHETORIC

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Invitational rhetoric, developed by Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin in 1995, is an alternative to the traditional conception of rhetoric as persuasion. Invitational rhetoric is defined as an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination. It constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does. Thus, it is a form of communication designed to generate understanding among individuals with different perspectives.

Invitational rhetoric challenges the traditional definition of rhetoric as persuasion, the conscious

intent to change others. A key assumption on which invitational rhetoric is based is that the effort to change others constitutes an attempt to gain control or power over them and is a devaluation of their lifeworlds; traditional rhetoric thus is seen as reflecting the values of competition and domination. In contrast, invitational rhetoric is rooted in the feminist principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination. *Equality* is a commitment to replace the dominance and elitism that characterize most human relationships with intimacy, mutuality, and camaraderie. Invitational rhetors eschew a hierarchical ranking of individuals according to external criteria and instead recognize the *immanent value* of all living beings. They see every being as a unique and necessary part of the pattern of the universe and thus as valuable. Concomitant with a recognition of immanent value is a rejection of efforts to change the unique perspective that each individual holds. *Self-determination*, then, allows individuals to make their own decisions about how they wish to live their lives and accords respect to others' capacity and right to constitute their worlds as they choose.

Invitational rhetoric assumes two primary rhetorical forms: (1) offering perspectives and (2) creating external conditions that allow and encourage others to present their perspectives. In offering perspectives, rhetors tell what they currently know or understand. They present their vision of the world and show how it looks and works for them. This vision represents an initial, tentative commitment to that perspective—always one subject to revision as a result of the rhetor's interaction with the audience.

The second rhetorical act involved in invitational rhetoric is the creation of external conditions. If invitational rhetoric is to result in a mutual understanding of perspectives, it must involve not only the offering of the rhetor's perspective but the creation of an atmosphere in which audience members are willing to share their perspectives with the rhetor. To facilitate such an environment, an invitational rhetor seeks to create particular external conditions in the interaction between rhetors and audience members. These external conditions are states or prerequisites that are required if the possibility of mutual understanding is to exist.

The three external conditions the invitational rhetor seeks to create in an interaction are safety,

value, and freedom. *Safety* involves the creation of a feeling of security and freedom from danger for the audience. Rhetoric contributes to a feeling of safety when it conveys to audience members that the ideas and feelings they share with the rhetor will be received with respect and care. The condition of *value* is acknowledgment by the rhetor that audience members have intrinsic or immanent worth. It is created when rhetors approach audience members as unique individuals and avoid distancing, paternalistic, and depersonalizing attitudes. Value is also fostered when the rhetor listens carefully to the perspectives of others and tries to think from those perspectives.

The third external condition, *freedom*, or the power to choose or decide, is enacted in various ways in invitational rhetoric. Freedom is demonstrated when rhetors do not place restrictions on an interaction—when participants can bring any and all matters to the interaction for consideration. Invitational rhetors also do not privilege their ideas over those of the audience and provide opportunities for others to develop and choose options from alternatives that they themselves have created. Freedom is created as well when the audience's lack of acceptance of or adherence to the perspective articulated by the rhetor truly makes no difference to the rhetor. Either outcome—acceptance or rejection of the perspective offered by the rhetor—is seen as perfectly acceptable by the invitational rhetor, who is not disappointed or angry if audience members choose not to adopt that perspective.

Change may be an outcome of invitational rhetoric, but change is not its objective. When change occurs through the process of invitational rhetoric, it may occur in the audience or the rhetor or both. All communicators in the interaction may change as a result of new insights they gain in the exchange of ideas and perspectives.

Invitational rhetoric is not an ideal for which rhetors should strive or a type of rhetoric that should or can be used in all situations. Invitational rhetoric is one of many useful and legitimate rhetorics, including persuasion, that are available to rhetors. It is a model of rhetoric that enables rhetors to recognize situations in which they seek not to persuade others but simply to create an environment that facilitates understanding, accords value

and respect to others' perspectives, and contributes to the development of relationships of equality.

Sonja K. Foss

*See also* Empathy; Feminist Rhetorical Criticism; I and Thou; Persuasion and Social Influence Theories; Rhetorical Theory

Foss, S. K., & Griffin, C. L. (1995). Beyond persuasion: A proposal for an invitational rhetoric.

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### Further Readings

Foss, S. K., & Foss, K. A. (2003). *Inviting transformation: Presentational speaking for a changing world* (2nd ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland.