

# GERTRUDE BUCK'S APPROACH TO ARGUMENTATION: PREPARING WOMEN FOR A MORE ACTIVE AND VOCAL ROLE IN A DEMOCRACY

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The real advantage of society involves ultimately the advantage of the individual member of society. And, conversely, the real betterment of the individual must inevitably tend toward the betterment of society. The two are no more separable in practice than are faith and works, thought and feeling, capital and labor, or any of those delusive apparent dualisms whose unity is the life of each part.—Gertrude Buck<sup>1</sup>

A number of scholars have applied what Robert Connors labels the “Decline and Fall” narrative in describing the history of rhetoric in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Typically, historians have portrayed the period as one of rhetorical regress—a lamentable lapse in the grand rhetorical tradition. According to this argument, traditional rhetoric declined in the nineteenth century but was successfully revived in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Although some scholars recently have challenged this narrative, more often historians have characterized the nineteenth century as virtually devoid of intellectual and social significance.<sup>4</sup>

In my analysis, I will counter such narratives by examining the work of Gertrude Buck, an English professor at Vassar College

during a transition into the first two decades of the twentieth century. I will demonstrate the intellectual and social significance of Buck's work. I will show how Buck introduced a democratic ethics to argumentation that broke down the claims of the domestic sphere by encouraging Vassar women to take a more active and public role in society. Like Jane Addams and other reform-minded individuals of her period, Buck was concerned with issues of social justice. Her social theory of discourse thus can be viewed as part of a larger effort to develop a social ethics responsive to the needs of citizens during the rapid industrialization of the 1890s and early 1900s.

To complete my analysis, I will focus on one of Buck's instruments of teaching writing, *A Course in Argumentative Writing* (1899), and what the instrument tells us about Buck herself. More specifically, I will show how Buck's textbook emphasizes a more democratic approach to argumentation and how this reflects her organic concept of society and her involvement in the women's suffrage movement. To provide a more textured understanding of Buck's approach to argumentation, I will focus not only on her textbook but also on other primary sources including student correspondence, articles, yearbooks, and other related materials. Such an analysis is significant because by studying these important pedagogical instruments, we may better understand the situated and multilayered nature of nineteenth-century rhetoric and the part that women played in developing that tradition.

## **Buck: An Overview**

To better understand Buck's textbook, we must know more about Buck, her social philosophy, view of language, and involvement in women's issues. Buck completed her Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition at the University of Michigan, working with Fred Newton Scott; then she taught at Vassar College from 1897 until her death in 1922. During her life, Buck authored and/or co-authored a thesis, a dissertation, a manual for teachers, several writing textbooks, a book on literary criticism, and a posthumously published collection of poems and plays. In

addition, she produced an edition of John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* and wrote numerous scholarly journal articles, many of which emphasized a democratic ethics and applied new insights from progressive education and the new field of psychology to rhetoric and pedagogy.

More specifically, Buck's individual publications include her master's thesis, *Figures of Rhetoric, a Psychological Study* (1895); her dissertation, *The Metaphor: A Study in the Psychology of Rhetoric* (1899); *A Course in Argumentative Writing* (1899); *The Social Criticism of Literature* (1916); and *Poems and Plays* (1922). Her co-authored books include *Organic Education: A Manual for Teachers in Primary and Grammar Grades* (1897) with Harriett M. Scott (Fred Newton Scott's older sister), *A Course in Expository Writing* (1899) with Elisabeth Woodbridge (Morris), *A Brief English Grammar* (1905) with Fred Newton Scott, *A Course in Narrative Writing* (1906) with Elisabeth Woodbridge Morris, and *A Handbook for Argument and Oral Debate* (1906) with Kristine Mann.

Underlying Buck's approach to rhetoric and composition is her social theory of discourse. Buck's theory is based on an organic concept of society, which emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between the social and the individual. A student of John Dewey at the University of Michigan, Buck viewed education as a way of bringing about her organic theory of society. Thus, a common theme in her textbook on argumentation is a democratic spirit aimed at broader integration of social classes through breaking down dualisms and traditional hierarchies. She believed that democracy was an achievable ideal, the ultimate end toward which society was moving.<sup>5</sup> Throughout her work in rhetoric and composition, Buck tried to accelerate this movement "toward establishing this right relationship" ("What Does 'Rhetoric' Mean?" 200). For Buck, such a relationship emphasized social justice or the principles of freedom, equality, and cooperation.

Buck enacted her social philosophy through her involvement in the women's movement, particularly the suffrage campaign. Her activism appeared to benefit from her friendship with progressive members of the Vassar faculty during this period. In his

description of the faculty, President Henry Noble MacCracken details what he labels the characteristics of the “creative” group:

They left the protection of the college rooms, and lived in town where they participated strenuously in civic life. They worked for suffrage, against child labor, against economic inequality and other forms of injustice. It was whispered of one of them that she had defended the rights of an unmarried woman to bear a child and rear it. One or two, it was darkly hinted, were socialists . . . . Dangerous women all of them. They rejoiced in every conflict of ideas. The times were ripe for change. (*Hickory Limb* 70)

MacCracken’s description fits women like Buck and her housemate Laura Johnson Wylie, chair of the English Department. Buck and Wylie considered adopting a child, and Buck had been a member of the Socialist Party of New York State.<sup>6</sup> They also left the confines of Vassar to live in the city, where they were active in civic life and devotedly worked for suffrage and social justice.<sup>7</sup>

Buck was a member of the Poughkeepsie Equal Suffrage League, and she served on the board of directors of the Women’s City and County Club, a reorganized version of the suffrage party after New York women won the vote in 1917. Based on a 1920 report, the club was involved in a variety of public welfare issues such as improving poor housing, providing civic education, monitoring state legislation, and opposing the “re-election of Senator Wadsworth, on the ground that we did not deem his social conscience sufficiently awakened to the needs of the present day” (“Condensed Report 1920” 6).

Buck also used her poetic talents to advocate for broader rights for women. In 1912, Buck published two limericks entitled “Anti-Suffrage Sentiments” in *The Masses*, a magazine that reflected a socialist viewpoint:

A delicate Angora cat  
Had whiskers; but, pray, what of that?  
“I don’t want to vote.”  
To a friend she once wrote:  
“My place is at home on the mat.”

“Let me hold the umbrella, my dear,”  
Mrs. Hen said to kind Chanticleer.  
“ ‘Tis man’s privilege, love.”  
And he held it above  
His own head, so it dripped in her ear.  
(qtd. in Campbell, *Toward a Feminist Rhetoric* xxvii-xxviii)<sup>8</sup>

In the first limerick Buck suggests that without the right to vote, a woman’s position in society is equally as restrictive as a cat “at home on the mat.” In the second, she shows how “man’s privilege” often is at the expense of women’s rights. In both limericks, Buck challenges the traditional patriarchal hierarchy and advocates broader rights for women.

## **Buck’s Approach to Argumentation and Debate at Vassar**

Buck’s interest in women’s issues and in social reform was not limited to her public activities, but also entered her classroom at Vassar. Educational materials provided to Vassar faculty by the National College Equal Suffrage League state that “[e]ducation in suffrage among the other undergraduates may be promoted through debates with student opponents of Woman Suffrage, suffrage plays and addresses by outside speakers.” In Buck’s classes, suffrage was debated by her students based on the assignments in her textbooks. For instance, in *A Course in Argumentative Writing* (1899) students are asked to write specific kinds of arguments leading to the following conclusions: “Women will be allowed to vote on all questions in all States” (125), “Every

woman should be able to earn her own living,” and “Women who desire to do so should enter the profession of medicine” (151). Appendix E of the textbook includes the following among a list of propositions for argument: “Women should receive the same salaries as men for the same work” (199), “Women’s clubs are a positive influence for good upon the community” (200), “Bicycle-riding is physically beneficial to women” (200), “The short skirt will ultimately be adopted by women for all street wear” (201), and “The life of women in the nineteenth century is extremely complex” (201). Although Buck’s textbook also includes examples that place women in more traditional roles, many encourage Vassar students to envision themselves in ways that extend beyond the domestic sphere.

In my analysis, I will demonstrate how Buck’s *A Course in Argumentative Writing* represents an indirect response to issues raised by suffrage.<sup>9</sup> The democratic ideals of cooperation, freedom of thought, and equality are at the heart of Buck’s social theory of discourse. These democratic ideals also are central to the suffrage movement. For Buck, suffrage is necessary because it is democratic; it promotes equality and individual freedom. By emphasizing these goals, Buck’s textbook prepared Vassar women for a more vocal and public social role.

This focus is significant when viewed in terms of other more widely used turn-of-the-century rhetoric and argumentation textbooks. For instance, in *The Foundations of Rhetoric* (1892), Adams Sherman Hill uses a few examples drawn from women authors, namely Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, and Jane Austen. However, Hill tends to use those authors, particularly Austen, to show examples of writing styles to avoid. For instance, Hill writes that one of the “sins against good use” is the practice “of making a plural pronoun represent a singular noun, a fault of which Miss Austen is frequently guilty” (139). Similarly, Hill contends that one example sentence taken from Austen’s work “lacks unity in every respect and from every point of view. It fell from the lips of Miss Bates,—a character in Jane Austen’s *Emma*,—who is as slipshod in mind as she is tedious and

confusing in speech” (281). As Campbell points out, Hill also used male writers to show examples of writing styles to avoid, but his biting critique of female authors would be particularly discouraging to female students (*Toward a Feminist Rhetoric* xxxiii). In *The Principles of Argumentation* (1895) George Pierce Baker, “one of the earliest and most influential of the late nineteenth-century argumentation theorists,” uses examples drawn solely from male writers, based on a review of the text’s index of authors (Clark and Halloran 22).

One notable exception among the prominent male theorists of this period is *Composition-Rhetoric: Designed for Use in Secondary School* (1897) by Joseph Villiers Denney and Fred Newton Scott, Buck’s mentor at the University of Michigan. In Appendix C of the book “Materials for Analysis and Reproduction,” Scott and Denney provide an extensive and impressive list of sources for teachers to draw upon. Many articles deal with current social issues, including those related to women. For instance, the “Essays, Speeches, Sketches” section includes articles titled “Cooperative Womanhood in the State,” “Women Wage Earners,” “Universal Suffrage in France,” and “Trade Unions for Women.” Appendix C provides a list of articles showing women in roles that extend beyond the traditional domestic sphere. Thus, although Buck’s textbook differs from some of the dominant male theorists of her time, she was not alone in providing students with examples of women in non-traditional roles.

Buck also was not the only individual attempting to design an alternative approach for women studying rhetoric during this period. Susan Kates, for instance, argues that Mary Augusta Jordan’s *Correct Writing and Speaking* (1904) “makes a contribution to the history of a feminist rhetoric because of its critique of the dominant pedagogical ideals of the writing and speaking instruction of the period” (501–502). As Kates notes, composition historians are just starting to discover other writings and teachings that challenge the dominant theorists of the period (508).

Although Buck was not alone in her efforts, she does seem to be one of the few women writing college textbooks on

argumentation during this period, based on a review of on-line catalogues. Her approach also seems more radically feminist compared to other argumentation and rhetoric textbooks written by women during this period. In *An Introductory Course in Argumentation* (1906), Frances M. Perry of Wellesley College critiques the dominant pedagogy of the time, as do Buck and Jordan. Like Buck, Perry advocates debate and discussion because “[t]he most excellent drill in argument is afforded by general informal class-room discussions . . .” (35). In addition, several examples in the book are drawn from current social issues such as immigration, corporal punishment, and labor unions. However, Perry’s text does not include examples related to women’s suffrage, nor does she include as many examples related specifically to women’s issues. More frequently, Perry’s examples and exercises are drawn from literature and seem aimed at promoting literary analysis rather than argumentation.

In *English Composition for College Women* (1914), Elizabeth Moore, Dora Gilbert Tompkins, and Mildred MacLean do include a chapter that prepares women for more active public roles. However, more frequently the book, which was written 15 years after Buck’s, seems to emphasize educating women for more traditional domestic roles. For instance, although the authors do not specifically address argumentation, they do include a section on “The Persuasive Address,” or “a talk prepared with the purpose of inducing such action on the part of the auditors as seems desirable to the speaker” (94). In this section, the authors declare “Women who wish to make the most of themselves should elect courses in mathematics and argumentation. No drill in exactness is wasted time,—the leaders among the women of to-morrow must be able to think straight” (96). This section also includes an essay titled “The Woman Question,” and it offers the following topics among a list of “Suggested Subjects”: “There should be a law prohibiting women from working more than eight hours a day in factories and shops,” “There should be state laws fixing a minimum wage for women,” and “The better class of women should be willing to accept the suffrage.” However, several



chapters of the book focus on more traditional roles. For instance, there are chapters titled “Story-Telling for Children,” “The Diary Theme,” “The Club Paper,” and “Letter Writing.” Thus, Buck’s textbook, with its focus on suffrage, argumentation, and democracy, seems quite significant when examined in relation to other turn-of-the-century rhetoric and argumentation textbooks.

Examining debating activities at Vassar and student correspondence reveals the influence of Buck’s textbook at the college. But the influence of her textbook beyond the gates of Vassar is difficult to determine. In John Michael Wozniak’s 1978 study of textbook use by 37 eastern colleges from 1850–1940, Buck’s textbook on argumentation is not listed as having been used by any of the colleges. However, Wozniak’s survey indicates that Buck’s and Elisabeth Woodbridge (Morris’) *A Course in Expository Writing* was used by Wesleyan College for one year (277). Although, in Wozniak’s study, Mount Holyoke is the only women’s college listed, the on-line library catalogues of the Seven Sisters Colleges show that Buck’s textbook on argumentation was listed at Smith, Mount Holyoke, and Radcliffe-Harvard colleges. The textbook appears to have gone through two editions, 1899 and 1901.

In *A Handbook of Argumentation and Debating* (1906), Buck and her co-author Kristine Mann also include topics on suffrage and issues related to women. Buck and Mann ask students to “write a three-minute speech to persuade a [w]oman who believes in suffrage that the suffrage would not be a good thing for women” (12). As Kathryn M. Conway points out, such activities not only allowed the anti-suffrage student to develop persuasive arguments, but also it helped the pro-suffrage student to better understand potential counter arguments and ways she could refute them (216).

Other topics in the handbook deal with a variety of issues relating to women, including working women’s concerns, and employment and education for women. For instance, one topic includes “writing a three-minute speech to persuade . . . the members of a working girls’ club to read the newspaper every

day” (12). Another asks students to prepare a formal debate on the following subject: “Resolved, That rich women should not enter any occupation where they will compete with those who must be self-supporting” (27). The handbook also asks students to organize arguments relating to the segregation of the sexes during the first two years of college. In a note, the authors point out that the arguments were drafted by a committee of alumnae of Chicago University when the coeducation question was being debated by the faculty (14).

Suffrage was also debated in the inter-class debate teams, which included the T. & M. House of Commons (*Tempus et Mores*) for students in odd-year classes and *Qui Vive* for students in even-year classes (Ellis 25). In fact, as Kathryn M. Conway points out, suffrage was “distinguished as the only topic out of more than fifty debated more than once in a ten-year period at Vassar, demonstrating both Buck’s influence and the students’ sustained interest” (216). The debating societies, moreover, were extremely active organizations, despite the college’s original official stance that “[o]ratory and debate are not feminine accomplishments; and there will be nothing in the college arrangements to encourage the practice of them” (qtd. in Ellis 25).

In *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, Robert Connors argues that with the entrance of women into higher education, rhetoric shifted from an oral, agonistic discipline to a more feminized, interiorized field in the latter part of the nineteenth century. To support his analysis, Connors quotes Vassar’s original stance on debate and concludes “[a]rgument and debate could not be major parts of a women’s course, and oral thrust and parry was out of the question” (54). It’s true that Buck’s approach to argumentation may not have been as agonistic as the approach used at male universities prior to the 1890s. However, Connors’ claim ignores the debating activities that did occur at women’s colleges and their popularity among women students.

This involvement was keen despite the fact debate was an extracurricular activity that required much time and preparation.

Students had to research their topics, develop persuasive arguments and refute potential opposition positions, write their arguments so that they resembled a forensic brief, and practice the oral presentation of their arguments (Conway 216). In correspondence to her parents, Helen D. Lockwood writes of her intense preparation for an upcoming debate:<sup>10</sup>

Only two more weeks before debate but those two weeks are going to be mighty strenuous. But after that you won't have to read so much about how we had a debate this afternoon and yesterday, etc. But when one is spending all her energy on that there really isn't room for anything else to happen so I guess you will have to put up with it. (5 May 1911)

According to the article "The History of Debating," published in the *Vassar Miscellany* special 50th anniversary number in 1915, interest in debating at Vassar reached a "climax" from 1897–1899 (West 149). Those years coincide with the period when Buck, along with other instructors, taught argumentation and when she alone taught advanced argumentation as an elective course from 1897–1898 to 1898–1899. During this time, Buck also wrote *A Course in Argumentative Writing*, which was published in 1899. Moreover, during this period subject hours in argumentation were significantly increased.<sup>11</sup>

The growing interest in debate also may be traced to the fact that an innovative class in argumentation was introduced in 1898–1899. Buck offered her Advanced Argumentation and Oral Debate course in connection with an Economics course entitled "The Relation of the State to Monopolies," taught by Herbert E. Mills, professor of Economics at Vassar. Buck describes the course in Appendix C of *A Course in Argumentative Writing*. She says students first meet for introductory lectures from Buck and Mills and then the "students themselves take charge of the course" (168). In the introduction, Buck contends that the study of argumentation is enhanced by debating. This is true not only for

the advanced course, she believes, but also for the required course in argumentation. Buck says one of the three meetings per week is devoted to a formal or impromptu debate in which the entire class participates: "These debates are not only regarded by the students as the most interesting feature of the course, but they seem fully to have justified their institution by the impetus they have given to the written work" (vii).

The fact that argumentation was a required course for nine years is also significant. Students who may not have taken the course as an elective were able to have their interest in debate stimulated. Similarly, other students whose talent for debate might have remained undiscovered were encouraged through the course in argumentation. The close relationship between the course in argumentation and debate is evident in a short ditty describing the T. & M. House of Commons in the student yearbook, the *Vassarion*, (1900):

In Sophomore Argumentation  
Our training's been simply great;  
And now before the public  
We challenge in debate. (105)

The growth of debate and acceptance of women speaking in public at Vassar directly parallels the period when women's suffrage was being debated nationally. This interest in debate was not limited to Vassar. On April 26, 1902, Vassar and Wellesley held the first women's intercollegiate debate. Vassar sent some 60 students and 30 alumnae from Boston with the college's debating team ("Wellesley-Vassar Debate" 1). The debate did not finish until about 10 p.m., and the results were then phoned in to Vassar (letter from Margaret M. Shipp to her mother, 26 April 1902). In a letter to her friend Gige, Mabel Stanwood (V.C. '04), describes the excitement at the college over the news that Vassar won the debate:

Everybody was crazy. We were all howling and running around, and in about one second all the stairs and hall were jammed with girls in all sorts of undress costumes, and everybody yelling and jumping with all her might. We quieted down once Miss C. came out with the official message from Caroline Sperry, the President of the Students. It said "Vassar won. It was an even debate." You never saw such wild girls. We had to get out somewhere, so we started for the front door, starting up "The Rose and Gray," and singing it as I suppose I'll never hear it again. (letter to Gige, undated)

Another student, Margaret M. Shipp (V.C. '05), writes her friend Mamie of the song sung by "eight hundred girls tonight as we marched round the campus waving torch lights, and accompanied by drums, flutes, tinpans, combs, everything you can think of to make a noise with":

Ain't got no time to tarry but—  
Hurrah! Hurrah!  
We've won the big debate!  
Hurrah! Hurrah!  
Come out and celebrate.  
Committee and debaters too  
We'll carry round in state!  
Now we're marching through Vassar!  
(28 April 1902)

From the student letters, it is easy to get a sense of the excitement and importance of debate to the women of Vassar.

Thus, we can see that just as women were gaining more of a public voice around the nation, they also were learning to effectively use that voice in women's colleges. Buck's textbooks and debating activities at the college allowed Vassar women to test out their arguments concerning suffrage and other issues related

to women. She helped to prepare women to be skilled public speakers.

Buck's commitment to public discourse, civic involvement, and social action was developing alongside and in contrast to what Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran interpret as a transformation from an oratorical into a professional culture during the nineteenth century (Introduction 1–26). According to Clark and Halloran, mainstream society was shifting from a civic orientation toward a more private emphasis on individualism and professionalism. In *Composition-Rhetoric*, Robert Connors discusses this shift from the perspective of gender, contending that rhetoric was feminized by the loss of argument and debate in the latter part of the nineteenth century. However, in reviewing Buck's textbooks and activities at Vassar, we can see that she resisted these values and instead supported her organic model of society, emphasizing civic involvement and public debate.

## **A Course in Argumentative Writing**

In addition to promoting argumentation and debate, Buck's pedagogy helped to prepare young women for a more active and thoughtful social role. In significant ways, Buck's pedagogy can be viewed as an indirect response to the issues raised by the suffrage movement—questions relating to individual freedom and the broader nature of democracy. These issues were important to Buck because she and other women were struggling to achieve broader rights in their everyday lives and on a broader national level. These issues also were central to her approach to argumentation. By promoting these values, Buck's pedagogy had feminist effects in terms of its influence on the lives of her students. Buck's pedagogy encouraged young women to question received opinion, to evaluate critically their own thought processes, and to act in a way that promoted equality and cooperation.

For instance, in her textbook Buck argues that students should learn argumentation inductively from experience and practice rather than starting deductively from principles of formal logic.

According to Buck, such an approach is “at once more difficult and more stimulating” than the typical method (iii). This is because the student is “not asked simply to accept certain logical formulae on the authority of text-book or teacher; but to quarry out these formulae from his own writing and then use them for such modification of the writing as may seem necessary” (iii). For Buck, the inductive method equates with the “laboratory” or experimental method of inquiry. Such a thought process, emphasizing the exploratory side of knowledge rather than reliance on tradition or principle, is also consistent with and necessary for a democratic society.<sup>12</sup>

In her textbook, Buck emphasizes beginning inductively rather than deductively; however, she clarifies the relationship in Appendix B of her book. Buck explains that “the processes of induction and of deduction arise side by side out of the chaos of the child’s earliest consciousness” (160). For Buck, induction and deduction are dialectically related. They both are “two phases or aspects of the same process of thought, each involving and each resting upon the other” (160). Although Buck isn’t choosing one over the other, her emphasis on starting with inductive reasoning can be viewed as a reaction against patriarchal and conservative approaches. By starting with inductive reasoning, Vassar women were not simply accepting received knowledge and, in so doing, preserving cultural authority. Instead, they were learning to think for themselves, to examine traditional assumptions. In using such methods, Buck was teaching her students to challenge unquestioning obedience to authority, including patriarchal authority.

Buck’s approach also runs counter to the “old idea of education,” where students were given abstract generalizations and, as Buck points out, told “only to apply them to particular cases” (153). Under the old method, students were not expected to think for themselves; instead, they were expected to memorize previous conclusions or generalized rules. Under such an approach, knowledge is restricted, bound by tradition and existing conclusions. Thus, education means accepting a body of

knowledge and passing it on basically unchanged. Buck's approach to argumentation, with its emphasis on the interrelation between inductive and deductive processes, does not completely negate tradition. However, by promoting personal observation and freedom of thought, Buck's more democratic approach challenges the conservative emphasis of the "old idea of education" (153).

### **A Focus on Student Interest**

A second major tenet of Buck's approach to argumentation is that the subject for argumentation should mirror the student's interests. "Interest" is a key term in discussions of education and psychology of the time. According to D. G. Meyers, two sides who staked out opposing positions on interest were the "humanists and developmentalists" (104). The humanists viewed the learner in terms of faculty psychology, which typically depicted the mind as consisting of various mental abilities or faculties that needed to be disciplined and trained. The developmentalists, on the other hand, were the supporters of education "as an unfolding of a child's *interest*, who embraced the Rousseauistic conviction that the 'human heritage' had too often meant a bridle of the child's true nature" (Meyer's italics) (Meyers 104).

Instead of falling into either of the two camps, Buck, like John Dewey, sought to resolve the conflict between the groups by blending self-activity (effort) with interest (Meyers 104). Similar to other progressive educators of her time, Buck saw the learner biologically; in other words, she saw learning as part of a "natural process of seeking, inquiring, purposing or looking for means to realize ends" (Beck 83). For Buck, interest is the glue that allows individuals to fully integrate the end with the means.

This view of interest is central to Buck's pedagogy. In "Recent Tendencies in the Teaching of English Composition" (1900), for instance, Buck contends that students have difficulty writing when the subject is remote from their interests. Thus, she argues teachers "often are reminded" that students have little to say about "'The vice of ambition' or 'Autumn thoughts'" (373). However,



she argues that all students have interests, which are worth communicating. Emphasizing student interest not only makes it easier for students to write. By encouraging students to draw on their interests, this focus also helps to break down barriers between academic work and the life of the student. In this way, Buck's pedagogy allows students to bring issues such as suffrage into the classroom.

## Logic and Argumentation

The third tenet of Buck's textbook on argumentation is the connection between the logical structure of argumentation and its substructure based in psychology. Buck contends that while the logical basis of argumentation is largely recognized, few recognize the psychology underlying this logic. Buck argues that "cut off from its deepest roots, logic has come to seem rather like a dead tool than like a living expression of thought" (v). In her book, Buck emphasizes that the logical and psychological structure of each argument is revealed to the student, "so that the maxims and formulae, usually regarded by the learner as the malign inventions of Aristotle, represent to our students rather the ways in which real people think" (v). Thus, in her pedagogy, she encourages Vassar women to evaluate critically their own thought processes rather than to rely on formal principles or tradition.

Buck stresses the importance of logic in argumentation, emphasizing its practical benefits. She explains that she uses the "syllogistic brief" to analyze arguments because "it brings into clear relief the actual structure of an argument, which the ordinary brief so often allows to be forgotten" (v). Buck says the purpose of learning such methods of analysis is that "nothing is more indispensable than this to a mastery of argumentation as a practical art" (vi). For Buck, the syllogism provides a way to think through and to illuminate the basic structure of an argument. In this way, it has practical application to the everyday problematic situations of life. In showing individuals how to analyze their own thought processes, they, in turn, can better understand the thought processes of others (Ricks 153). Buck's approach is novel, because

traditional theories of knowledge and ethics, such as Kantian ethics, typically were removed from everyday life, locating the object of knowledge in a transcendent realm of fixed absolutes. Thus, logic tended to be formal and abstract rather than informal and practical.

For Buck, finding a “train of reasoning” that will lead another person to a given conclusion basically means “looking into one’s own mind and noting the series of ideas which there have actually established the conclusion for one’s self” (4–5). A student can “feel assured” that the “train of reasoning” will lead to the same conclusion in another’s mind “simply because in his own it has already done so” (5). According to Buck, this is not an unreasonable assumption “in view of the fact that the mental processes of all normal people follow the same general laws . . . ” (5). In other words, for Buck logic is “knowledge of those typical activities of mind common to all thinking people” (5). Here again, we see Buck emphasizing freedom of thought rather than reliance on abstract rules or tradition. Her approach to argumentation is aimed at creating women capable of critically evaluating their own thought processes, women unaccepting of blind obedience to authority, and, most important, women suited to democracy.

### **Critical Reasoning, Egalitarian Behavior, and Sympathy**

In addition to Buck’s three major tenets, her definition of argumentation reflects her democratic ethics. Buck’s definition underscores her emphasis on the audience and its active thought process and critical reasoning ability. She also stresses that argument itself must be a cooperative, egalitarian activity. Buck defines argumentation as the “act of establishing in the mind of another person a conclusion which has become fixed in your own by means of setting up in the other person’s mind the train of reasoning which has perviously [*sic*] led you to this conclusion” (3). Since Buck believes certain mental processes are universal, she encourages students to examine the “train of reasoning” in their

own mind to understand how it will lead the audience to a similar conclusion. As Vickie Ricks points out, the argument “acts as a guide,’ setting up a line of reasoning in someone else’s mind, not merely a conclusion” (161).

Thus, in Buck’s cooperative approach, knowledge is something people do together.<sup>13</sup> Argumentative knowledge must engage the mind of the speaker and the hearer in a reasoning process. In other words, the speaker and the hearer need to identify with each other’s thought processes. For Buck, argumentation is not something a speaker does to the passive mind of the hearer. Instead, it is a more egalitarian process involving a speaker and an active, thinking auditor. Underlying Buck’s approach is her organic concept of society, which emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between the social and the individual. This focus is evident in her view of the connection between induction and deduction. For Buck, personal observation and induction is formed in relation to deduction or the broader social context (Ricks 153). The interplay of the individual and the social also is evident in her use of the syllogistic brief. The substructure of the syllogism reflects the dynamic relationship between a writer’s assertion and a premise shared by the audience. It reflects the fact that both contribute to the argumentative process.

The importance of the audience and its critical reasoning process is particularly evident in Buck’s discussion of debate in Appendix C. According to Buck, the main difference between argumentation and debate is that debate involves three participants and argumentation two. Debate includes the speaker, the audience, “but also a representative of the resisting element in the mind of the audience—the speaker’s opponent” (162). According to Buck, the opponent

embodies and expresses the opposition felt by the audience to the speaker’s conclusion, as the speaker embodies and expresses his acquiescence. The two opposing debaters, then, represent each a distinct movement of the mind of the

audience toward or away from a certain conclusion . . .  
(162)

Unlike a “simple argument,” then, the speaker does not merely convince his or her opponent. The speaker ultimately must convince the audience. To do this, the speaker needs to bring to articulate and reasonable expression the “formless tendencies” in the audience’s mind.

Buck’s notion of “formless tendencies,” based in contemporary psychology, reflects her belief that ideas develop from a whole through successive differentiations. In addition, the speaker not only must deal with the direct objections of the opponent but also must detect all the potential objections of the audience. Debating for Buck is equivalent to “an explicit presentation on each side of the implicit movement of the mind of the audience toward or away from a certain conclusion . . .” (164). Thus, according to Buck, successful debating depends on the “clearness with which each speaker divines the unspoken reasonings of the audience” and the “force with which these [the audience’s] reasonings are presented” (164). In debating, then, as opposed to argument, debaters embody opposing positions in the mind of the audience. Debaters uncover the “formless tendencies,” the yet unrecognized arguments in the audience’s mind, and they express them as fully formed reasons and conclusions (Ricks 160). Buck’s focus on audience encourages speakers to have a broader social consciousness. In debate, speakers must respond to the larger needs of the audience, not just their fellow debaters. By teaching such an approach, Buck encouraged Vassar women to have a keener sense of social responsibility.

Besides her emphasis on audience, Buck’s egalitarian emphasis is particularly evident in her article “The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory” (1900). Buck synthesizes two competing rhetorical theories to construct a new democratic theory of rhetoric aimed at promoting equality and cooperation. She justifies the synthesis by arguing that all “true” social functions are egalitarian in action, “leveling conditions” between the speaker

and hearer. Hence, the goal is not the persuasion or coercion of the hearer to the speaker's position. The hearer must first re-enact the "train of reasoning" of the speaker and then make his or her own decision on the matter in question.

Buck's more cooperative, transactional idea of argumentation also is evident in her view of how people think through arguments. According to Buck, in complex arguments a sympathetic imagination may be required. Sometimes an individual may refuse to accept "the train of reasoning" of the other person. In this instance, the individual "must put himself imaginatively in the place of the person he addresses, and then come, by any way he logically can, to the conclusions he desires to establish" (7). For Buck, sympathy, or the ability to put oneself in the place of another, is key to resolving difficult situations. Furthermore by using imagination, an individual can experimentally test out different possible options before applying them in the real world.

In the appendix of her textbook on argumentation, Buck contends that the "bibliography of argumentation is as yet meager" (204). Contemporary rhetoricians, like George Pierce Baker and E.J. MacEwan, disagree over the significance of logic to argumentation. In addition, Buck argues that much of Aristotle's and Quintilian's work in rhetoric was "devoted to 'persuasion,' in which argumentation was regarded as a factor of varying importance" (204). She adds that George Campbell and Richard Whately had a similar emphasis and that "modern rhetoricians" have devoted "scant space, or none at all, to argumentation, and those who consider it have thrown little light upon its problems" (204).

It is important to note that today composition scholars would probably disagree with Buck's analysis. For example, in "On Distinctions between Classical and Modern Rhetoric," Andrea A. Lunsford and Lisa S. Ede challenge the assumption that the goal of classical rhetoric is persuasion. Drawing upon the work of William M.A. Grimaldi, Lunsford and Ede argue that the aim of rhetoric for Aristotle "is an interactive means of discovering

meaning through language” (44). Similarly, in *The Formation of College English*, Thomas P. Miller contends that Campbell extends the boundaries of rhetoric beyond persuasion “to define it in more modern terms as ‘that art or talent by which the discourse is adapted to its end’” (218).

Although Buck may seem to be reacting against the rhetorical tradition, in the preface of her book she emphasizes that she is instead bringing out something from within the tradition. She explains that her book was developed out of “certain beliefs concerning the study of argumentation which, tho perhaps not wholly novel, have as yet found no recognition in the literature of the subject” (iii). In *A Course in Argumentative Writing*, it is evident that Buck is introducing a more democratic approach to argumentation. By doing so, Buck also is encouraging Vassar women to challenge received opinion, to deal with issues of personal interest, and to evaluate critically their own thought processes. Since Buck views language as moral action, she also is encouraging them to act in a way that promotes equality and cooperation.

Buck’s view of argumentation and its important social influence seems to have been an idea her students supported. For instance, a student editorial entitled “College Debating” in the 1907 *Vassar Miscellany* argues that inter-society debating is healthy because “both societies have the common function of drawing together all the members of the college” (106). The article continues, underscoring the importance of cooperation:

So it happens that our debating societies connect rather than break up our college organization. And now why is this last function of debate work so important to the college? It is simply because union means cooperation and it is only through cooperation that we can accomplish the highest social good. So let us give more of our energy to debating, not only that we may obtain perfection in that line, but that we may encourage a spirit of enthusiastic cooperation throughout the college. (106)

Another student editorial entitled “Socialized Speech” in the 1909 *Vassar Miscellany* argues that “[w]e need to realize that our habits of speech are powerful forces in the furthering or retarding of that community of understanding to which we look as the necessary basis of all social progress” (335). Thus, the goal is to benefit the broader community. The article’s conclusion echoes Buck’s words:

The way to socialize our speech, to precisely adapt it to the listener while completely expressing ourselves, lies neither in oversensitiveness to others’ opinion, nor in overconsciousness of our own, but in the concentration on the idea itself. If we think our own thoughts through, we shall see them in all their relations to the thoughts of others, in all their possibilities of intimate, convincing expression. If we can learn,—and it lies within the power of every one of us, to say precisely what we see, we shall be on the way toward making our speech social, that is, *communication*.  
(author’s italics) (335)

Buck’s social theory of discourse was not merely something she wrote about in her textbooks. Based on these student editorials, it seems to be a concept that Vassar women internalized and were applying in their own lives. Thus, by promoting communal interests, equality, and freedom of thought, Buck’s social theory of discourse did have feminist effects, particularly in terms of its influence on her students.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

From this examination of Buck’s textbook on argumentation, we can see that just as women were gaining more of a public voice in the national arena, Buck and other women were teaching their students in women’s colleges to effectively use that voice. Through debating activities, Buck helped to prepare Vassar women for a more vocal public role, one that encouraged them to

break away from domestic concerns and to focus on community activism.<sup>15</sup>

Buck's pedagogy underscored the democratic principles of cooperation, freedom of inquiry, and equality. These values are evident in her emphasis on cooperation rather than subordination in her approach to argumentation. This emphasis is evident in Buck's use of the syllogistic brief, which encouraged students to view argumentation as a communal activity. These values also are evident in her emphasis on free inquiry or the inductive method of argumentation so that young women can learn to think for themselves rather than simply to accept the ideas of others. The student's individual intellectual growth then is viewed in terms of gaining a deeper understanding of the interrelated or communal nature of life. Finally, these values are evident in her emphasis on equality, where Buck tries to encourage communication on an equal basis. Buck's approach to argumentation also is based on a premise of psychological equality. Buck rejects the idea that women should be relegated to "a separate, inferior intellectual sphere" (Ricks 163). Instead, Buck believes that all individuals follow the same cognitive processes. Thus, men and women do not argue differently if argument is understood as a thinking process.

These democratic ideals also are central to the suffrage movement. For Buck suffrage is necessary because it is democratic—it promotes equality and individual freedom. We also can understand why establishing a more democratic approach to discourse was so important to Buck. Since Buck viewed language as a social act, a more democratic discourse meant a more democratic society at every level of social existence—something Buck and other women at Vassar wanted and were fighting to achieve.

In exploring Buck's approach to argumentation, I have emphasized the social and intellectual significance of her work to challenge more simplistic "Decline and Fall" narratives. As John C. Brereton points out, viewing the history of composition as the loss of rhetoric in the nineteenth century and the last two decades as



the period of triumphant revival not only represents a limited perspective, but it “explicitly devalues almost a century of teaching and learning” (xiii 35). In my analysis, I have contextualized Buck’s pedagogy within her social philosophy and women’s suffrage to show the complex interplay of ideas that form her democratic approach to argumentation. Such an analysis is significant because it shows how studying Buck’s work can add depth and dimension to our often-simplistic nineteenth-century narratives, expanding our understanding of the history of rhetoric and composition in the nineteenth century and of the role women played in shaping that history.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Organic Education: A Manual for Teachers in Primary and Grammar Grades* (1897), 19–20. Buck co-authored the book with Harriet M. Scott.

<sup>2</sup> “Writing the History of Our Discipline,” in *An Introduction to Composition Studies*, ed. Erica Lindemann and Gary Tate (1991), 64–65. One of the first historians to point out the decline of rhetoric in the nineteenth century was Albert R. Kitzhaber in his influential 1953 dissertation, which was published in book form in 1990. See *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850–1900*.

<sup>3</sup> Within the last decade, several historians have challenged the “Decline and Fall” narrative. For recent examples, see Robert J. Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* (1997) and Nan Johnson, *Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America* (1991). However, as Connors points out in *Composition-Rhetoric*, the argument “needs continually to be made” (3).

<sup>4</sup> John C. Brereton, preface to *The Origins of Composition in the American College, 1875–1925: A Documented History* (1995), xii–xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Buck, like Dewey, seems to define democracy not merely as a form of government but as a form of association among individuals that is based on the principles of freedom, equality, and cooperation. A dynamic, organic concept of society, in which the individual and the social are in a reciprocal relationship, is central to her view of democracy. This concept assumes that what benefits the individual also benefits society and vice versa. Thus, there is no opposition between individual and social interests. Buck’s ethics is key to her view of democracy because it provides a method to democratize our concrete relationships. Her ethics is based on viewing knowledge as a communal and cooperative activity in which all are assumed to participate and contribute. Thus, the process of creating knowledge also builds the type of relationships inherent in a democratic society.

<sup>6</sup> For details concerning the adoption of a child, see “The Book Boat,” column by Montgomery Cooper, VC '09, in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 29 May 1932. For Buck's membership in the Socialist Party, see John William Leonard, ed., *Woman's Who's Who of America*, (1914).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of how Lucy Maynard Salmon battled with President Taylor over the right of women faculty to live off campus, see Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s*, 186–87.

<sup>8</sup> *The Masses*, June 1913, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> JoAnn Campbell and Kathryn M. Conway have explored the influence of suffrage issues on Buck's work, as I will do. In Campbell's 1996 introduction to a collection of Buck's writing and in her 1989 dissertation, she examines the suffrage debates to underscore differences in administrative philosophies between the college and the English Department. Campbell contrasts the patriarchal administrative style of President James Monroe Taylor and the board of trustees with the cooperative and democratic approach of the English Department led by Laura Johnson Wylie and Buck (*Toward a Feminist Rhetoric* xxiii; “Gertrude Buck and the celebration” 100).

Conway's analysis focuses on connections between suffrage and rhetoric at the Seven Sisters Colleges from 1865–1919. In her essay “Woman Suffrage and the History of Rhetoric at the Seven Sisters Colleges, 1865–1919,” Conway briefly discusses Buck's use of suffrage issues in *A Handbook on Argumentation and Debating* (1906), which she co-authored with Kristine Mann. Conway details how suffrage issues were discussed in Buck's textbook and how suffrage was a topic of interest to the “debate societies” at Vassar. She concludes that rhetoric classes at the Seven Sisters Colleges significantly added to the “intellectual growth” of suffrage (204) and that the societies provided women with “great confidence in their own ability to be effective public speakers and political leaders” (222).

<sup>10</sup> A student of Lucy Maynard Salmon and Laura Johnson Wylie, Lockwood went on to become “a stunningly innovative” English professor, according to Elizabeth A. Daniels (*Bridges to the World* 175). Lockwood, who graduated in 1912, taught at Vassar from 1927 to 1956 (Heller 163). Similar to Laura Johnson Wylie, Lockwood taught at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, where she served as a composition instructor and specialized in public speaking. According to Rita Rubinstein Heller, “extant Lockwood syllabi provide a striking illustration of the tough-minded liberal empowering workers through explicit skill development” (213).

<sup>11</sup> In 1894, argumentation became a required subject. Scheduled for the sophomore year, it was a two-semester course, meeting one hour a week. From 1898 to 1903, argumentation was required for one semester only. However, it met three hours per week instead of just one, so that the total hours were increased by 50 percent. In 1903, argumentation became an elective rather than a required subject. See Helen C. West, “The History of Debating,” (1915), 149.

<sup>12</sup> Buck was not the only teacher at Vassar advocating such methods. In the English Department report for 1906–07, Laura Johnson Wylie asks for a building or room to serve as a “laboratory” for the English Department. Wylie writes, “The English teaching, as I have several times said, is practically laboratory teaching, and consequently needs a certain material equipment for effective work. The lack of it means incalculable loss to both teachers and students, and through them to the college.” Lucy Maynard Salmon also encouraged students to examine primary sources, sift through the material and develop their own conclusions instead of relying on traditional opinion. See Elizabeth Daniels, “Suffrage as a lever for change at Vassar College,” (32) and Agnes Rogers, *Vassar Women: An Informal Study*, (55–56).

<sup>13</sup> I am borrowing this definition of “knowledge” from John T. Gage. See “An Adequate Epistemology for Composition: Classical and Modern Perspectives” (1984), 156.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion of the dreams and experiences of Vassar women in college and in society, see Debra Herman, “College and After: The Vassar Experiment in Women's Education, 1861–1924” (1979).

<sup>15</sup> Buck was not alone in her pedagogical approach. In the book *In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley*, Patricia Ann Palmieri argues that during the Progressive period, the all-female faculty at Wellesley similarly eroded the claims of the domestic sphere by emphasizing communal interests and activism. Like Buck, the women of Wellesley were linked to the intellectual currents of the time. Palmieri contends that “[t]his new vocabulary of the social self forged in society connects them with such intellectuals as Josiah Royce, Mary Follett, John Dewey, and Jane Addams, who saw education as a vehicle for creating a new organic culture” (150).

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