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# Using Science to Argue for Sexual Education in U.S. Public Schools

## Dr. Ella Flagg Young and the 1913 “Chicago Experiment”

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During the Progressive Era, Dr. Ella Flagg Young instituted the first sexual education program in U.S. public schools. She garnered support for her “Chicago Experiment” by integrating scientific appeals about sexual education into popular discourses on modern research methods, education, and physical health. Although Young lived in an era when respect for science was at an all-time high, she created arguments for public sexual education that balanced scientific information about sex with audiences’ ideological/moral concerns. This rhetorical history builds from critical rhetorical theory to offer implications for contemporary health advocates attempting to steer sexual education policy in new directions.

**Keywords:** *Ella Flagg Young; Progressive Era; rhetorical history; sexual education*

In the fall of 1913, over 20,000 high school students graduated from the first sexual education program in U.S. public schools. The program consisted of three lectures designed to inform students about “personal sexual

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hygiene,” “problems of sex instincts,” and “a few of the hygienic and social facts regarding venereal disease” (Moran, 1996, p. 501). Many students graduated from the program knowing more about reproductive biology and venereal diseases than did their parents or grandparents.

Yet this controversial program almost never happened. The previous year, the founder of the initiative and superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, Dr. Ella Flagg Young, had proposed to the Chicago Board of Education that “specialists in sex hygiene who lecture in simple, yet scientifically correct language, be secured to give in the fall term of 1913, a course of three lectures” (“Attack on Eugenics for High Schools,” 1913, p. 8). Despite the climbing rates of venereal diseases, prostitution, and “promiscuity” for which Chicago was earning a reputation (Stead, 1894; Miller, 1996; Boehm, 2004), many citizens were shocked by the notion that public schools might provide students with information, however scientific, about sex. Correspondingly, board members initially resisted instituting a program that their constituents were sure to reject, especially in an era when the infamous federal and state Comstock laws were still in effect.<sup>1</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* (“Board Ousts Ella F. Young,” 1913) reported that Young “had been told she had better not advocate the adoption of instruction of sex hygiene in the schools because in so doing she would arouse the opposition, then dormant, of certain members of the school board” (p. 1). Yet advocate she did. And, by the end of the summer, Young had not only convinced the board of education to vote in favor of her “Chicago Experiment,” she had garnered enough community support to institute the initiative that fall.

Today, the Chicago Experiment marks the beginning of a long line of sexual education programs in U.S. schools. From personal purity courses to social hygiene initiatives, family life education to AIDS education, and now abstinence-only, abstinence-plus, and comprehensive sexuality education, over the last century the United States has been the site of debates about *if* sexual education should be taught in the schools and, now more frequently, *what* information sexual education curricula should include. Often these debates pit the interests of “morality” or “ideology” against the interests of “science” or “empiricism.” Those on the side of the latter tend to argue that scientific evidence should dictate educational guidelines. For instance, comprehensive sexuality education advocates cite studies demonstrating that programs that go beyond abstinence education to include lessons about “safe” sex are most effective at reducing the number of venereal diseases and unwanted pregnancies in young people (Jemmott, Jemmott, & Fong, 1998; Brückner & Bearman, 2005; Guttmacher Institute, 2005; Santelli et al., 2006). Science, they reason, supports their position and therefore public

policy should follow suit almost automatically. As Dr. Ralph J. DiClemente (1998) laments in an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*:

Given the weight of scientific evidence demonstrating the efficacy of safer-sex interventions and the absence of clear and compelling data demonstrating a significant and consistent treatment advantage for abstinence programs, it is difficult to understand the logic behind the decision to earmark funds specifically for abstinence programs. (p. 1575)

Indeed, federal policy makers do not seem to be using these studies to guide their decisions. Under the American Family Life Act, Title V of the Social Security Act, and a new Community Based Abstinence Education program, the U.S. government allocates funds to abstinence-only initiatives exclusively (Dailard, 2006). DiClemente goes on to conclude, "Unfortunately, much of the public health policy debate appears to have been ideologically motivated rather than empirically driven" (p. 1575).

But communication scholars have long held that science and ideology are not mutually exclusive, and "rhetoricians of science" in particular have noted that no information, no matter how scientific, is value-neutral (Ceccarelli, 2001). For example, in *The Rhetoric of Science*, Alan G. Gross (1990) demonstrates that science is a "product of persuasion," an ideological argument that rhetors can frame in a variety of ways rather than a fact that truth-seekers will certainly accept (p. 3). Correspondingly, Carol Reeves (2002) explores how scientists present scientific findings about disease to the public by invoking orthodox values, and Judy Z. Segal (2005) discusses the relationship between scientific diagnosis and cultural expectations and beliefs. Because science is always ideological, analyses of the rhetoric of science tend to reveal the ideological assumptions at the core of scientific claims (Bush & Boller, 1991). The present essay's ideological explorations demonstrate that regardless of the level of support audiences tend to grant empirical assertions, scientific findings generally will not influence public policy decisions until advocates present their logic by drawing from cultural rationale with which audiences are comfortable.

Given the controversial nature of their topic, sexual education advocates must use familiar narratives, values, and warrants (i.e., the often taken-for-granted reasoning that links data to claim in an argument; see Toulmin, 1958) to build support for their proposals. For instance, in *A.C. Green's Game Plan*, an abstinence-only sexual education curriculum used in many contemporary Illinois public schools, a heterosexual, disease-free marriage is framed as the "prize" that students "win" if they abstain from sex (Project Reality, 2005,

p. 58). This narrative linking abstinence in adolescence to healthy marriage in adulthood draws from long-standing American values about families and traditional gender roles. Although the warrants holding this narrative together have many critics, the curriculum gains favor because a contingency of Americans are persuaded by this ideal. In this sense, although it may be tempting for scientifically oriented health advocates to argue simply that “‘facts’ and ‘rights’ demand ‘progress’ into the future, even at the cost of traditional values” (Murphy, 2005, p. 664), blanket appeals to empirical science rarely gain many adherents, especially when findings are at odds with social norms.

In this essay, I demonstrate that even during the Progressive Era, a peak of scientific modernity in the United States (Clarke, 1961; Recchiuti, 2006), successful rhetors such as Young packaged scientific logic about sexual education within existing public conversations in order to build support for their initiatives. Young did not offer audiences scientific information about, for instance, venereal diseases without accounting for their cultural assumptions. Her willingness to make scientific appeals using popular warrants about modern research methods, education, and physical health helped her to establish the Chicago Experiment when many members of society had never heard of public sexual education. I find that Young’s rhetoric initially worked (i.e., convinced the Chicago Board of Education and others to support the Chicago Experiment despite pressure to do otherwise) because she successfully integrated arguments for public sexual education into other, existing discourses (one discourse was overtly scientific and two were not) and used the warrants from those discourses to justify her plan.

In an effort to unpack how Young advanced the fight for sexual education in the United States, this paper explores the rhetorical strategies of fragmentation that she used to introduce sexual education into the Chicago Public Schools. By connecting fragments of disparate arguments, I argue that Young eased audiences into supporting a concept that is almost as controversial today as it was a century ago. I conclude this essay by suggesting that contemporary health advocates consider following Young’s lead, that is, using the warrants of existing conversations to frame their scientific findings rather than depending on empirical science alone to build support for educational policy decisions.

## **Young’s Appeals for Public Sexual Education**

As the first female superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools (1909-1915) and the first female president of the National Education Association

(1911-1912), Young had numerous opportunities to communicate with various publics, and she used them to speak about educational theory, ethics, and the connections between schools and society. But despite Young's title as the first person to institute sexual education in a U.S. public school system, one topic that Young did *not* speak about very often or for any extended period of time was sexual education. She rarely, if ever, made sexual education the sole topic of her rhetoric, which may explain the lack of scholarship on her sexual education advocacy. Instead, Young promoted public sexual education in general and the Chicago Experiment in particular in the same way that she utilized scientific reasoning, by broaching the topic in the midst of other discourses. Because Young communicated about sexual education in fits and starts, inserting the issue briefly into addresses or stating her opinions to reporters, the rhetoric that serves as the artifact for this investigation is fragmented, which offers an excellent opportunity to utilize a critical rhetoric orientation to analysis acknowledging the fragments of discourse that make up arguments (McKerrow, 1989; McGee, 1990).

The texts analyzed here are drawn from a variety of different sources such as Progressive Era newspaper interviews and reports, educational journals, books and articles that quote Young and discuss her work, and conference proceedings, all of which feature either Young building an argument for public sexual education or Chicago leaders and community members responding to her arguments. After collecting these materials from the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota, the Special Collections Library at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and numerous other sources, I selected the texts quoted here because they provide insight into what Raymie E. McKerrow (1989) would call the discursive "process" concerning sex and education that encompassed Chicago during the Progressive Era. Taking a "critical rhetoric" approach to analysis, McKerrow notes that all rhetoric, whether a seemingly self-contained speech or a series of disparate argumentative appeals, draws from diverse sources (fragments of discourse) to create meaning. In the present analysis, I build from McKerrow's rhetorical orientation to highlight Young's fragmented appeals, focusing specifically on how she inserted arguments for public sexual education into three specific Progressive Era discourses and then used the warrants from those discourses to build support for the Chicago Experiment. These conversations focused on (a) the credibility of facts and scientific research methods, (b) a philosophy of education that connected learning to future citizenship, and (c) the importance of physical fitness and its connection to intellectual growth. By drawing from these conversations, Young not only convinced board of education members and their

constituents that teaching students about sex was logical on several different levels, she did so without the benefit of U.S. precedent.

## Morality of Scientific Information

Young repeatedly inserted arguments in favor of sexual education into discourses about the credibility of scientific facts. But rather than simply appealing to the certainty of scientific reasoning, Young extended the logic at work in those conversations to argue for the inherent morality of scientific information. In this sense, she proceeded from the assumption that what was moral and what was scientific were not mutually exclusive, that in fact morality and science naturally overlapped, and she framed her appeals accordingly.

The Progressive Era is well known for its infatuation with modernity, science, and the expert. During this time, scientific methods became the driving force behind the management of research institutions, factories, public schools, and social organizations (McGerr, 2003). Although Young often discussed issues of morality in her efforts to build support for public sexual education, she also joined many of her contemporaries in arguing that science enabled researchers to expose the “truth” more than did other methods of inquiry. She explained,

The great advance of science which has brought the modern world to her feet, has been due to a habit of mind that subjects all facts to an impartial, sympathetic investigation called scientific. The attitude of the scientist is that of the intelligent seeker after truth. The attitude cannot be taken by one whose premises are false, or whose conclusions are biased by individual likes and dislikes. Scientific method is the method, the attitude of mind, that makes a search for the principle under which facts observed may be explained in their relations and made significant. (Young, 1906, p. 4)

During the early 20th century, this scientific mode of analysis helped people to justify the study of topics such as sexual health that vice reformers of the 19th century had deemed inappropriate for public discussion. Members of the social hygiene movement, a group consisting largely of health professionals, educators, and social workers dedicated to halting the spread of venereal diseases (Engs, 2003), argued that because scientific research demonstrated that the spread of venereal diseases was directly related to sexual activity outside of marriage, social institutions had a responsibility to provide citizens with information about venereal disease transmission, prostitution, and chastity.<sup>2</sup> To

ensure that the information these institutions made available to the public was accurate, institutional representatives tended to stress the scientific foundations of their sexual education efforts. For instance, when the Chicago Society of Social Hygiene (CSSH) released sexual education pamphlets in the early 20th century, the group assured readers that only the “facts well known to all physicians are herewith presented” (American Social Hygiene Association, 1908b). Another CSSH pamphlet aimed to give readers “the protection afforded by the plain truth” (American Social Hygiene Association, 1908a). Similarly, according to Dr. Maurice Bigelow (1929), a biology professor and leader in the American Social Hygiene Association, the social hygiene movement was founded on the “undisputed facts of sanitary science” (p. 229).<sup>3</sup>

The claim that scientific information was more credible than was other types of information made the testimony of medical experts especially convincing. Arguments grounded in medical and scientific authority served as the basis for many Progressive Era movements. For instance, Dr. Prince A. Morrow (1904), the founder of the social hygiene movement, argued that physicians were “the only competent authorities in [venereal disease infection]” (p. 345). He explained that sexual education

would have more weight and more persuasive force coming from a medical man, whose right to speak authoritatively on questions of hygiene cannot be questioned. . . . Medical tracts are not to be recommended as a rule, as they are too often the resource of quacks. (p. 346)

CSSH members also worried about “quacks,” and an association pamphlet warned readers against the “dangerous misinformation furnished by ‘quack’ newspaper advertisements” (American Social Hygiene Association, 1908a). Society members argued that only those individuals trained in scientific methods could be trusted to convey truthful information about sex.

By contrast, social purists, or “moralists” as they were sometimes called, argued that talking about sex was only legitimate if it encouraged individuals to act morally, and they were not convinced that scientific information about sex necessarily encouraged morality. Much like abstinence-only advocates today, social purists worried that talking about sex in the schools would implicitly encourage students to experiment with sexual behaviors before marriage. Morrow (1904) explained the seemingly “irreconcilable conflict between moralists and the hygienists” by noting,



The former look upon vice as far more disastrous to society and the individual than its resulting physical maladies; that it is a moral evil that should be combated by moral means alone. The hygienists look upon the effects of vice, the diseases it engenders, their menace to the public health, their morbid irradiation into the family and social life, and their pernicious effects upon the descendents and the race as the greater evil. (pp. 360-361)

Morrow and his fellow social hygienists struggled to convince moralists that hygiene and morality did not have to be mutually exclusive, that they could work together to better modern society. Nevertheless, members of social purity organizations such as the American Purity Alliance remained wary of medical experts who attempted to heal patients of venereal diseases without teaching them that having sex outside of marriage was morally wrong (Moran, 2000).

When Young began campaigning for support for the Chicago Experiment, she worked to bring these two factions, neither of which had managed to get a sexual education program into the public schools, together. She argued that scientific facts about sex were not just credible, a position that most Progressive Era citizens already upheld, but that they were also inherently moral. While social hygienists were arguing that issues of health and morality *could* work together, Young argued that they *always* worked together because they were one and the same. She extended the assumptions of the social hygiene movement to demonstrate that the Chicago Experiment would not excite students' dormant sexual passions because scientific facts were incapable of inspiring such excitations. Young recognized that "quacks" and other laypersons could misrepresent science and trigger young people's curiosity about sex, but she claimed that if responsible scientific "experts" gave students information about sex, the students could not be corrupted by such courses.

Given this reasoning, Young worked to prove that the Chicago Experiment would include only scientifically generated information about sex and that individuals in charge of the lectures would be certified "experts" with scientific backgrounds. On numerous occasions, Young assured her constituents of the "scientific basis of instruction" (Young, 1912, p. 120), and she repeatedly noted that "the instruction will be given by physicians" with "fine training" (Young, 1913a, p. 72). She guaranteed her constituents that the lecturers would discuss only scientifically based information about sex in a manner that was neither confusing nor potentially exciting. In this way, she assured them that students would not have their morality tested in the classroom. If anything, Young argued that students would emerge from the Chicago Experiment more

firmly committed to a chaste lifestyle then they had been before taking the courses.

Other pro–sexual education advocates backed up Young’s claims. For instance, R. E. Blount (1912), a biology teacher from Chicago, asserted that “the scientific way of looking at sex cannot possibly harm a child” (p. 138). He, like Young, held that if students learned about sex through the findings of medical experts, rather than “quacks” or those uninformed by modern research methods, they would not be tempted to have sex outside of marriage. In a *Vigilance* article, Young explained that many parents of children in the Chicago Public Schools also agreed with this reasoning:

Parental opposition to the teaching of sex hygiene in Chicago schools has practically disappeared since the parents learned the exact nature of the new course . . . . We first called meetings of parents and medical men who are conducting the lectures in the schools, explained just what use was to be taught. Parents who first objected are now on our side, and the only opposition that now exists comes from outside sources and from persons who do not really understand what we are teaching. (“Sex Education in the Schools,” 1913, p. 5)

Here, Young argues that once parents realized that the personal purity lectures revolved around scientific findings and were delivered by “medical men” (and medical women for courses targeted at girls), the parents no longer opposed them.

Young’s reasoning complemented social hygienists’ claims about the necessity of including sexual education in the public schools. According to historian Jeffrey Moran (1996), social hygienists argued that “average parents did not possess scientific information about sexual hygiene and other critical aspects of modern living and suffered from overly traditional and ineffectual attitudes” (p. 490). Thus, these parents were incapable of providing their children with scientific lessons about sex. What parents taught their children about sex, if they taught them anything, was not grounded in science and therefore was not inherently moral.

Yet not everyone could be convinced that scientifically grounded sexual education courses were interconnected with morality. Dr. Charles Keene argued that “it has never been proven that knowledge compels purity” (Keene & Wright, 1914, p. 695), shrewdly using the language of scientific method (“proven”) to demonstrate that science may not be inherently moral. Similarly, Dr. Richard Cabot delivered a paper before the Congress of the American School Hygiene Association in 1911 in which he admitted, “I have very little confidence in the restraining or inspiring value of information, as such. I have

seen too much of its powerlessness in medical men and students” (Bigelow, 1929, p. 230). Cabot argued that many so-called medical men, who were well aware of the scientific facts about sex and other potentially vice-ridden matters, still behaved in ways that some people considered immoral. In their cases, knowing the “facts” and obtaining scientific degrees did not prevent them from having sex with prostitutes, masturbating, or having pre- and/or extramarital affairs, behaviors that social purists condemned.

Others, however, were convinced by Young’s equation of science and morality and concluded that “Mrs. Young’s plan for personal purity talks to the elementary pupils in a way in advance of anything yet advocated in that line” (“School Boards Scored as Bad for Teachers,” 1913, p. 10). These supporters, represented by both local Chicago residents and those living as far away as New York and California, endorsed Young’s Chicago Experiment in order to meet the “almost universal demand for more plain facts” (Keene & Wright, 1914, p. 700). In this case, Young’s arguments in favor of sexual education seemed to convince people to support the Chicago Experiment because she used the assumptions of scientific credibility and, more specifically, a warrant from the social hygiene movement that scientific facts about sex could work in conjunction with a moral agenda, as an argumentative foundation. Then she took that reasoning one step further to demonstrate that scientific facts about sex were inherently moral and therefore incapable of corrupting students who learned of them in school. Beyond Young’s arguments concerning the inherent morality of scientific information, she also inserted pro-sexual education arguments into less scientifically oriented discourses such as those concerning a popular Progressive Era philosophy of education. In this way, she further communicated her belief that arguments based on scientific logic alone are not enough to win over public opinion or affect policy decisions.

## **The Chicago School’s Philosophy of Education**

Young helped to found the “Chicago School” philosophy of education, and on several occasions she interjected conversations based on this philosophy to argue for sexual education courses in the Chicago Public Schools. While existing theories of education framed schooling as the passing on of information from teacher to student, as preparation for a specific occupation, or as an exercise in mental discipline, the Chicago School’s philosophy of education, which eventually infiltrated schools around the country, connected learning with democratic citizenship. Historian Mary Herrick (1971) dates the emergence of the Chicago School in the 1890s and identifies John Dewey as its “spokesperson” (p. 81). Dewey worked as a

professor of philosophy and pedagogy at the University of Chicago from 1884 to 1904 and is known today for his many writings on pragmatism, psychology, and education. He repeatedly argued that schools must educate the “whole child” by emphasizing lived experience over abstract concepts. In *Moral Principles in Education*, Dewey (1909) explained,

We must take the child as a member of society in the broadest sense, and demand for and from the schools whatever is necessary to enable the child intelligently to recognize all his [*sic*] social relations and take his part in sustaining them. (p. 5)

That is, schools should provide children with access to experiences and subject matter that will help them to interact with others and become interested in exploring the world around them. Dewey held that schools must link lessons to students’ experiences outside of class in order to make those lessons salient and useful to them (Lagemann, 2002). Teaching children “classic” literature, for example, was not instructive if that literature did not resonate with their lived experiences. In this light, schools that focused primarily on teaching children to follow directions or memorize instructions did both students and society at large a disservice because “the society of which the child is to be a member is, in the United States, a democratic and progressive society. The child must be educated for leadership as well as for obedience” (Dewey, 1909, pp. 6-7). According to Dewey, schools must inspire children to think and act on their own if those children are to oversee a functional society in the future.

In 1895, Young began taking graduate courses under Dewey in the Department of Education at the University of Chicago. After earning her PhD and publishing her dissertation as *Isolation in the Schools* in 1901, Young worked as the director of Dewey’s famed Chicago Laboratory School and as a professor of education at the University of Chicago. Over the years, the two scholars developed a very similar philosophy of education, but according to historian Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (2002) it was Young, well versed in Chicago’s maternalist ideology, who tended to apply that philosophy to real-world situations, and it was Young who used the Chicago School’s argumentative warrants to build support for sexual education programs in the public schools.

Young’s work with Dewey solidified her conviction that Chicago schools should supply students with tools for future citizenship. In her 1911 annual report as superintendent of schools, Young (1911b) claimed that the goal of the Chicago Public Schools was to “invigorate and strengthen the children for their future as citizens in this republic” (p. 105). Yet, as Dewey

(1909) explained in *Moral Principles in Education*, the Chicago School's concept of citizenship went far beyond voter training:

The child is to be not only a voter and a subject of law; he [*sic*] is also to be a member of a family, himself in turn responsible, in all probability, for rearing and training of future children, thereby maintaining the continuity of society. He is to be a worker, engaged in some occupation which will be of use to society, and which will maintain his own independence and self-respect. He is to be a member of some particular neighborhood and community, and must contribute to the values of life, add to the decencies and graces of civilization wherever he is. (p. 6)

In this light, schools must “train young people for citizenship” in the sense that they must help them to develop into multifaceted, self-sufficient individuals, capable of meeting the demands of life in the 20th-century United States. At its heart, the Chicago School's philosophy of education was guided by an organic model of teaching and learning. The curriculum emerged in accordance with students' previous experiences, potential experiences, and interests rather than with predetermined objectives.

Young used this argument, that students' environments, experiences, and goals should dictate their program of study, to convince Chicago residents to support sexual education courses in the public school curriculum. She argued that students' biological and physical environments demanded that they learn about sex in the schools. In terms of biology, Young took Dewey's call for teaching the “whole child” quite literally. As early as 1868, she was providing the teachers in the Chicago Normal School with Saturday morning lectures titled *The Human Body—Parts and Uses* (McManis, 1916). She held,

Children should be taught to know something of the wonderful structure and mechanism of the body; they should be taught to care for that body; to keep it clean, to keep it pure; they should be made to realize that knowledge of their environment comes by way of the organs of special sense; that the interchange of thought with parents and friends is effected through the action of nerve and muscular structure. (Young, 1906, p. 24)

Here, Young points out that because students' bodies connect them to their environment, they must learn about all of their bodies' “parts and uses.” Although she does not explicitly mention the reproductive organs or secondary sexual characteristics in this quotation, by using the words *clean* and *pure* to talk about instruction concerning the body, words that were popular among early social purity advocates, she implicitly includes them. By referring to the body's parts

as “wonderful” and “special,” she works to replace the often negative connotations of sexual bodies with positive connotations about how even the body’s sexual “parts and uses” play a role in citizens’ connections with each other. She reminds her student teachers that bodies need to be “properly” cared for in order to be useful in adulthood, and she reasons that because young people do not inherently know how to protect their bodies from dirt, disease, and abuse, someone must teach them.

In this case, Young drew from the Chicago School rationale that the schools should teach young people what they need to know to navigate their environments, especially if students are not learning that information at home. For instance, in her 1911 report as superintendent of schools, Young (1911b) argued that the schools must teach students about finances because “the economical use of money and material is, to a considerable extent, neglected in our homes” (p. 104). On several different occasions, Young used this same logic to argue that schools should teach students about sex. She explained that sexual education was a job that “should be done in the home, but which is done in only a few homes” (Young, 1913a, p. 73). She claimed that “the parents who have the courage, intelligence and tact to explain the sex organs and functions to their children are so rare that its [*sic*] needs must fall on the school system to convey this information” (“Sex Education in the Schools,” 1913, p. 5). Others in favor of public sexual education had long argued that parents were not teaching their children about sex. For instance, the president of the Chicago Department of School Patrons and a CSSH affiliate, Mrs. William S. Heffernan, told the *Chicago Tribune*, “There is a whole lot of objection to the teaching of sex hygiene in the schools. It is said that it should be taught in the home, but it is evident that it is not being taught in the home” (“School Boards Scored as Bad for Teachers,” 1913, p. 10). But Mrs. Heffernan and others like her did not necessarily link their argument to the Chicago School’s assumptions about citizenship. Young, by contrast, argued that children’s bodies were tools for interacting with society as citizens. Therefore, she demonstrated that schools had a responsibility to the community and the nation to teach students about the sexual aspects of their bodies, especially when many students had no alternative channel for obtaining information about sex.

When Young became superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools, she surveyed the schools under her charge and concluded,

You’d suppose from rigid exclusion of sex knowledge from the schools that children were supposed to know all about these particular organs, their functions and abuses, or else were supposed to learn of them by accident or the

good graces of their fellows. As a consequence they usually learn of them in a grossly perverted way through the bad graces of the evil minded among their companions. ("Sex Education in the Schools," 1913, p. 5)

In this case, Young argued that students' biology *and* their physical environments demanded that the public schools teach them about sex. Here, the "evil minded among their companions" serves as a synecdoche for Chicago's depraved underworld. Young implies that students *will* encounter "perversion" and "bad graces" while making their way in Chicago, and they must be prepared to meet those challenges and resist persuasion. Students face what Young (1911b) calls "the low and brutal" when they are in the "real world," and thus their schooling must address those issues as well (p. 101). In an "environment filled with temptation," students will not be able to realize their potential as self-sufficient citizens if they do not learn how to deal with that temptation (Young, 1911b, p. 87). By excluding information about sex from the curriculum, Young maintained that the city of Chicago was setting itself up for inheriting a generation of citizens who were either ignorant about sex, perverted, or "evil minded."

Yet not everyone agreed that Chicago's environment demanded that its residents learn about sex at school. For instance, in an editorial letter featured in the *Chicago Tribune*, the governor of Illinois, Edward F. Dunne, explained,

I honestly fear that if sex hygiene be taught in the schools and young boys and girls in the open class room are made aware of things which may be taught in the line of sex hygiene, it may create, and probably will create, in their young minds a prurient curiosity which will induce, rather than suppress, immorality and unchastity [*sic*]. ("Governor Opposes Teaching on Sex," 1913, p. 1)

Dunne assumed that young people would not necessarily come into contact with "prurient" information about sex if they did not encounter it in school and that students' biology would not direct them toward sexual exploration if they had a proper moral compass. Thus, students' environments did not demand that they attend sexual education courses or otherwise learn about sex and sexual "vices." Similarly, after hearing about Young's Chicago Experiment, one mother exclaimed,

If any person attempted to "instruct" my innocent children in subjects that modesty tells us to ignore, I would horsewhip the "educator," and thus give him or her a needed lesson in respecting the rights of parents to bring up their

little ones in innocence of the terrible evils of life. ("Sex Education in the Schools," 1913, p. 4)

Like Governor Dunne, this individual argued that if parents protected their children from issues regarding sex they could grow up without having to know about or cope with such issues. Therefore, she held that sexual education was not a tool that students needed to become self-sufficient members of society. If parents simply taught their children to "ignore" the "terrible evils of life," rather than to question or interact with them, those children could remain "innocent" of such topics for the rest of their lives.

But even though some citizens believed that their children could simply disregard sex, the ever-increasing rates of venereal diseases, prostitution, and other "promiscuous" activity in Chicago and throughout the nation countered this line of reasoning, as did the many children who were born to single, adolescent mothers (Boehm, 2004). No matter how "innocent" the child or vigilant the parent, young Americans would have to deal with sex eventually, on both biological and environmental levels, and if experiences should dictate curriculum, as the Chicago School's philosophy of education suggested, then Young's proposal in favor of including sexual education in the public made logical sense to many individuals. Taking up Young's logic, people across the country held up her program as a valiant effort to provide children with the information about sex that they needed to be self-sufficient citizens. For instance, the editor of the *St. Petersburg (FL) Times* argued that "no crusade against vice, however well-intentioned or spectacular, is complete unless it includes tactful tuition of children in their formative years" ("Sex Education in the Schools," 1913, p. 7). Although what the editor meant by "tactful" is unclear, this quotation implicitly acknowledges that children would encounter issues of sex and other vices and thus the topic must be included in their lessons.

Young's pairing of the Chicago School's philosophy of education with ideas about the sexual nature of students' biology and physical environment, as well as the claim that parents were not teaching children about sex at home, encouraged citizens to think about public sexual education outside of the emotionally charged debates that tended to surround such issues.<sup>4</sup> Beyond her references to the Chicago School's philosophy of education and the credibility of facts and scientific research methods, Young inserted arguments in support of public sexual education into one final conversation: She appealed to popular warrants about the science of physical health as it related to intelligence.



## Physical Health and Argument From Classification

The final conversation into which Young inserted pro-public sexual education arguments involved the importance of physical health and the connections between health and mental ability. According to historian Ruth Clifford Engs (2003), Progressive Era citizens tended to be well versed in the various health reform movements that were surging at this time. These movements focused on issues such as temperance, anti-tobacco and narcotics, disease prevention, nutrition, chastity, and physical exercise. So-called “clean living movements” were designed to reform public as well as individual health practices and “clean up” American society (p. 74).

Young, an advocate of health reform on many levels, worked throughout her career to enhance her students’ physical health. She repeatedly argued that children who were hungry, dirty, sick, or unable to breathe clearly would not be able to concentrate while at school. In this respect, she shared the opinion of a larger movement, which she recognized during a speech before the National Education Association:

The school patrons who form a department in the National Education Association are making tremendous efforts toward carrying this idea of the physical well-being of the children into every school in the land, and they will succeed because those women are in earnest. (Young, 1911a, p. 184)

Young and the “school patrons” of whom she spoke argued that the schools had as much responsibility to care for students’ physical health as they did to care for students’ intellectual growth. She represented their beliefs, as well as her own, by explaining, “It has long been customary to say that education deals with the physical, the mental, and the moral development,” with no one area any more important than the others (Young, 1911a, p. 183). Some of these patrons were members of the American School Hygiene Association,<sup>5</sup> which was formed in 1906 to encourage U.S. public schools to make students’ physical health a chief curricular goal. They tended to agree with health enthusiasts such as Dr. Dudley Sargent who argued that there was a correlation between physical fitness and mental capacity (Engs, 2003). Sargent, who headed the Harvard Hemenway Gymnasium for 18 years and established one of the first teachers’ colleges for training in physical education, held that fit students tended to be smarter students and vice versa.

Young had national support from Sargent and American School Health Association members when she introduced programs into the Chicago Public Schools designed specifically to ensure that students were physically healthy. As superintendent, she earned a reputation for prioritizing student

health by maintaining a penny lunch program, building school bath houses, regularly flushing school buildings with fresh air, and prohibiting teachers from disciplining their students with corporal punishment. Young reasoned that teachers who struck students when they misbehaved could not then credibly teach those students to care for and respect their bodies.

After years of surveying Chicago Public School students, Young (1913b) announced, "The fact is indisputable that a large proportion of our boys and girls are ill developed physically" (p. 108). She explained that students in the Chicago Public Schools had developed curved spines from slouching, shriveled muscles from lack of activity, and weak lungs from contaminated school buildings (Young, 1911b). According to Young, these conditions had to be remedied because they limited students' aptitude for learning and their potential as future citizens. Unhealthy students made for unhealthy adults, incapable of contributing to society. In an effort to reverse this health crisis, Young mandated that the schools provide students with better and longer physical education classes. She indicated that she was not the only educator dedicated to improving students' health by informing the National Education Association that "today all over this country, in the large cities and towns, special effort is made to get at the physical condition of the children and see that they neither injure each other nor are injured by the surroundings of the school" (Young, 1911a, p. 104). According to Young, many of the nation's schools were actively playing a role in improving students' health and public health in general.

In the process of positioning herself as a champion of student health, Young cleverly included sexual education in her agenda to improve students' physical well-being. While discussing the connections between students' physical health and their intellectual development, Young framed sexual education courses as just one more effort to realize her prohealth plan. In doing so, she made students' attendance at such courses seem as innocuous as their participation in a nutrition class or a physical fitness program. In various speeches and writings, Young reminded citizens that they largely supported health reform movements and had already tacitly approved of using the schools as a vehicle for improving the physical health of Chicago's young people. As sexual education courses offered students information that they needed to become physically healthy, Young explained that the proposed lectures were simply an extension of what schools already offered students. By classifying sexual education as a subcategory of health education, she worked to convince board of education members that including sexual education in the curriculum was neither extraordinary nor potentially harmful to students.

Young encountered little opposition to programs designed to improve students' physical health, and therefore she also hoped to avoid opposition when she began discussing sex hygiene as a topic that students must learn in the schools. She repeatedly grouped together "gymnastics, physiology, and hygiene" to make her pairing of sexual education with other types of health education seem natural (Young, 1911b, p. 98), and she noted:

The child is told in school that if he [*sic*] doesn't keep his skin clean, his system will fill up with poison, that if he abuses his stomach, he'll suffer with indigestion, if he gathers the contagion of tuberculosis, he'll die of consumption, but never a word of sex organs and the terrible cost of abuses. ("Sex Education in the Schools," 1913, p. 5)

Again, Young uses an argument from classification to demonstrate that education about the "sex organs and the terrible cost of abuses" is no different from education about health topics such as bathing, digestion, or epidemiology. She works from the assumption that citizens generally see the value in teaching children about proper bathing, nutrition, and disease prevention. Therefore, she implies that their reasoning is inconsistent if they do not see the value in teaching children about sex hygiene as well. If anything, the "poisons" that develop from dirty skin or poor diet are less harmful to them than are the venereal diseases that can result from pre- or extramarital sex. Young (1913a) argues that students need "simple healthful talks" about sex in the same way that they need talks about other health topics (p. 74). In this light, she framed the Chicago Experiment not as a program designed to work in isolation from other education programs but as an extension of a program that the schools had already instituted. And by the summer of 1913 even the National Education Association recognized a conference panel on "sex hygiene" as a subset of health education ("School Boards Scored as Bad for Teachers," 1913), which demonstrated that Young's classification of public sexual education was being adopted by others across the country.

Young further connected sex hygiene with physical health by arguing that the two could work together to keep children from "abusing" their sex organs. She observed that in schools where students were kept physically and mentally occupied, "Little nervous strains were worked off by the way those children directed their energies and their interests with the things about them" (Young, 1913a, p. 74). Young reasoned that children who were given regular opportunities to run and play generally did not have energy left to direct toward masturbation or sexual experimentation. By contrast, children who were rarely let out of their desks were less able to work off

their “nervous strains” in wholesome ways. In this light, active school-children who learned how to care for and protect their bodies in sex hygiene courses would have neither the energy nor the desire to, as Young put it, misuse their bodies.

In summary, Young classified sexual education as a subset of health education and then reminded audiences that they generally approved of the public schools’ efforts to disseminate information about health to students. She used the warrants of Progressive Era health movements, which connected physical health to intellectual growth, to justify her support for public sexual education courses, and she demonstrated that students who had an outlet for their physical energy while in school were less likely to engage in sexual behaviors. Although many audiences, including members of the National Education Association, were convinced by Young’s argument from classification, some like Dr. Charles H. Keene remained skeptical. Keene argued that sexual education was more complicated than other types of health education, and therefore sexual education was “not a matter to be left to an athletic or football coach” (Keene & Wright, 1914, p. 697). Keene was against providing sexual education courses in the public schools, but even he conceded that health educators who had “been properly trained” in the science of venereal diseases and morality could be trusted to provide “this instruction” to parents. In this sense, Young’s attempt to classify sexual education as a subset of health education worked to convince even sexual education critics that teaching people about sex was not as shocking as they had previously believed.

## **Afterword and Implications for Contemporary Health Advocates**

Dr. Ella Flagg Young’s rhetoric helped her to institute the first sexual education program in U.S. public schools. Unfortunately, despite a number of early indicators of success,<sup>6</sup> Young’s Chicago Experiment did not survive beyond its inaugural year. In November of 1913, Washington officials deemed transcripts of the lectures “unmailable” under the Comstock Law after the National League for Medical Freedom attempted to send them to students’ parents (“Sex Lectures Unmailable,” 1913). Shortly after the ruling, the board of education caved in to pressure from Comstock supporters and voted against continuing the lectures in the following academic year.

But even though the specific initiative that Young endorsed was short-lived, I argue that it functioned as a rhetorical catalyst for the many public

sexual education programs that began proliferating over the next few years. Not only did Young's argument fragments come together to help build support for the Chicago Experiment, they also publicized a new pro-sexual education vocabulary that health advocates could use to promote future programs. As Celeste M. Condit explains (1990), once rhetors introduce new appeals into public discourse, future arguments "are then easier to make, because supporting practices and the warrants from the arguments are already in place . . . this public repertoire of meanings exerts influences on the outlines of policies" (p. 7). Indeed, by 1920, less than a decade after the first public sexual education program was initiated, the U.S. Bureau of Education found that almost half of all U.S. secondary schools provided students with some form of sexual education (Edson, 1922).

Evidence that this quick rise in sexual education programs in U.S. public schools was made possible, at least in part, by the precedent of the Chicago Experiment exists in the endurance of some of Young's specific appeals. For example, Young's classification of sexual education as a type of health education is a practice that continued in the teens and 1920s, throughout the 20th century, and even today. After World War II, the American Social Hygiene Association changed its name to the American Social Health Association to reflect the organization's emphasis on sexual education as a type of health education (Moran, 2000). Today, public sexual education courses are often offered as subsections of health education curricula so as to make their teachings seem less controversial. Similarly, contemporary abstinence-plus education courses tend to emphasize the "science" behind the spread of venereal diseases and relate those "facts" to a moral course of action, namely, abstinence.

Of course, connecting rhetorical appeals that were used almost a century ago with present-day communication situations is a tenuous business, especially given the many changes in U.S. culture that have transpired during that time. Today, for instance, the Kaiser Family Foundation (2000) reports that almost 90% of U.S. secondary school students will take at least one sexual education course before they graduate, a percentage that is much higher than it has been in years past. Also, discourses about the role of women in society initiated by waves of feminist activists in the mid to late 20th century have altered the resources that rhetors use for discussing gender equality, sexual health, and reproductive politics. Yet these changes do not imply that fights about sexual education are a thing of the past. Battles about the function, content, and merit of sexual education curricula in public schools are no less frequent than they were in the early 20th century, and adolescents living in the United States are still suffering from

high rates of STDs, unintended pregnancies, and abortions, comparatively higher than those in other developed countries (Guttmacher Institute, 2001).

Given that the United States continues to tackle major problems regarding sexual education curricula and efficacy, Young's situation offers some valuable rhetorical lessons to contemporary health educators following in her footsteps by attempting to steer sexual education policy in innovative directions. One of the most important lessons that 21st-century health advocates can pull from Young's discourse is her implicit refusal to depend on scientific logic alone to build support for her cause. Although she was a self-described proponent of the "scientific method" (Young, 1903), she integrated her pro-sexual education arguments into several discourses that were related to a variety of topics, including science. Even when she entered into an overtly scientific conversation about modern research methods, Young demonstrated how scientific logic was interconnected with issues of morality. Young's support for the Chicago Experiment demonstrates that even if scientific evidence appears to point toward one curriculum over another, advocates of that curriculum must do more than simply cite those findings if they want to convince decision makers and their constituents to support their cause. While this point is hardly a new one (Burke, 1969; Segal, 1994), battles over sexual education curricula are often won and lost by the tenets of identification alone. Abstinence-only-until-marriage advocates lack scientific evidence proving that their programs protect students' health, but they tend to draw so expertly from societal values about adolescents and sex that, according to sociologist Janice Irvine (2002), they have largely controlled federal policy on public sexual education since roughly the 1960s. By contrast, comprehensive sexuality education advocates have scientific evidence to prove that their curriculum protects students' health better than do other curricula, yet because they have such strong evidence they often fail to package their findings using accepted warrants and discursive patterns. Young's experience illustrates the level of cultural awareness that health advocates must utilize to gain support for a new program.

More specifically, contemporary health advocates would be wise to emulate Young's aptitude for bringing together fragmented arguments, building from those arguments, and creating new claims that convince decision makers to consider fresh directions in curricula. For instance, just as Young framed the empirical concerns of the social hygiene movement with the moral concerns of the social purity movement as one and the same, today's advocates must find ways to bring the logics of abstinence-only, abstinence-plus, and comprehensive sexuality education programs into one corresponding argumentative space. Young's efforts to subtly insert arguments in favor of sexual education into other conversations and to use those

conversations' warrants to convince audiences of her arguments' validity stand in stark contrast to most arguments about sexual education today. According to Irvine (2002), contemporary arguments about sexual education rarely function in the realm of the subtle. Instead, debates about public sexual education often become shouting matches, complete with fainting participants, police escorts, angry protestors, and exaggerated news coverage. Similarly, Progressive Era debates about sexual education were hardly rational, calm affairs, and Young's fragmented rhetoric helped her to sidestep the circus that was those debates and draw from other, more convincing, rhetorical resources. Her experience demonstrates that a rhetor does not have to, and sometimes is not wise to, author individual "texts" dedicated to addressing a controversial topic. If Young had followed the path of many comprehensive sexuality education advocates today by appealing primarily to empirical evidence to promote her proposal using individual, self-contained speeches or writings, U.S. public school administrators may still be asking *if* schools should teach sexual education rather than debating what information they should teach.

## Notes

1. In 1873, the New York vice reformer Anthony Comstock successfully lobbied Congress to pass the Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles for Immoral Use (i.e., the federal Comstock Law), which made illegal the sending of "obscene" materials such as pornography, contraceptives, and abortifacients through the U.S. mail and gave the government the power to search and seize those suspected of doing so. Twenty-four states soon passed "mini-Comstock Laws" which deemed the mere possession of obscene materials a crime. These laws were still in effect in 1913 (Reed, 1978; Horowitz, 2002).

2. By the 1920s, social hygiene advocates had instituted a number of sexual education programs in the public schools, but they managed to do so only after the inauguration of Young's Chicago Experiment (Brandt, 1985; Pivar, 2002). During the late 19th century and early 20th century, social hygienists circulated reading materials to mostly male publics emphasizing the science of venereal diseases and the importance of avoiding sexually transmitted "germs" (Clarke, 1961).

3. The Chicago Society of Social Hygiene (CSSH) was one of several local social hygiene chapters that functioned as a subunit of the national social hygiene organization, the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA). Both the CSSH and the ASHA were extremely active throughout the Progressive Era, providing Young with both local and national systems of support for her initiatives in the midst of intense opposition from "Comstockian" traditionalists (Beisel, 1997; Horowitz, 2002).

4. One example of an emotionally charged public debate about U.S. sexual education occurred in the summer of 1913 (the same summer that Young was campaigning for the Chicago Experiment). The health reformer and eventual champion of the birth control pill Margaret Sanger attempted to publish information about venereal diseases in the *Call*, a New York socialist newspaper. When the U.S. Post Office refused to distribute the column under

the federal Comstock Law, Sanger printed the original title of the column, "What Every Girl Should Know," with an addendum: "By order of the post office—NOTHING" (Kennedy, 1970, p. 16). Two weeks later Sanger received an order from Washington, D.C., allowing her to print the article, which she later published in her book *What Every Girl Should Know* (1914). In 1914, Sanger fled to Europe for a year to escape prosecution for violating the Comstock Law on several different occasions.

5. The American *School* Hygiene Association should not be confused with the American *Social* Hygiene Association, although both organizations have been referred to as the ASHA and originated during the Progressive Era. The former organization was dedicated to making physical exercise a standard element of public school curricula, and the latter organization was dedicated to championing scientific public sexual education programs for citizens across the country (Engs, 2003).

6. Only 8% of parents removed their children from the first round of lectures, and, according to Dr. Mabel Wright, 90% of surveyed graduates found the lectures helpful and worth continuing in the future (Keene & Wright, 1914).

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