LEARNING TO INHABIT WRITING

The act of writing is always situated, in attitudes and expectations, in cultures and histories, and in locations that are both concrete and meaningful. Teaching composition in ways that attend to the situatedness of writing involves putting into practice our understandings of where and how writers situate themselves and locate acts of writing in attitudes, expectations, cultures, histories, and places. As one example of the prospects of situating writing in a web of personal investments, collective practices, and physical locations, Nedra Reynolds observes:

From one-inch margins to the differences between business writing and technical communication, we recognize and abide by dozens of spatial practices in the everyday. The clearer the boundaries, the more confident we are about keeping some out or letting some in; however, this border mentality has made boundaries more important than the places themselves. . . . Places—whether textual, material, or imaginary—are constructed and reproduced not simply by boundaries but also by practices, structures of feeling, and sedimented features of habitus. Theories of writing, therefore, should reflect this deeper understanding of place. Writing is an act of inhabiting discourses, not just moving through stages of a process. (560)

What makes this claim for writing as an act of inhabiting so important for teachers of writing is the parallels it has in disciplines concerned with inhabiting spaces, including architecture, geography, and urban planning. As I describe below, some architects and urban planners have taken seriously the claim that language use and literacy practices more generally are acts of inhabiting spaces, so much so that they have argued for revising curricula in architecture and urban planning in order to make literacy, rhetoric, and writing central concerns.

Compositionists attending to claims for the significance of literacy, rhetoric, and writing in urban planning curricula can better define the

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productive limit of spatial issues in the formation of composition curricula and pedagogy. At some point, locating writing spatially becomes less about the task of teaching writing and more about the tasks of spatial orientation that have been organized into disciplines such as geography and urban planning. At the same time, locating the study of spaces and places in language use becomes at some point less about geography and urban planning and more about practices of literacy, conventions of rhetoric, and the process of writing. Where the disciplinary organization of the study of space and the study of composition converge and coalesce lie shared concerns that have consequences for both theoretical reflections and pedagogical practices. In what follows I briefly review the inclusion of literacy lessons and rhetorical learning into the architecture and urban planning curricula. I review these curricula here in order to then demonstrate how they can be turned to inform attention to place in the teaching of writing. I conclude with a discussion of some assignments that such perspectives support.

Where Words and Places Collide

To locate the line separating concerns about place from issues of composition, it is worth beginning with a rhetorical question, “If the city could speak, what would it say to us?” The question is posed by planning theorist Robert Beauregard, who answers that, “The city, of course, cannot tell us of its problems or its prospects, its successes or its failures. The city is not a speaking subject. Rather, it is the object of our discourse. We speak for the city; it is spoken about” (59-60). Beauregard’s point in reminding us that we speak for and about cities is to explain the consequences such speaking has for how cities-as-objects are perceived and occupied. I begin with Beauregard’s use of the distinction between speaking subject and spoken about object because the distinction conveys a less obvious truth about the relationship between a representing subject and the space of representation that explains writing as an act of inhabiting discourse.

We do not simply speak for and about places, such as cities, the same way we speak for and about other kinds of objects, such as hammers, rocks, or shoes. Cities are different kinds of objects because we occupy them. And it is in our occupation of the physical space of a city that the city becomes a space we occupy and fill with meanings. Here, the word occupied has at least two uses. We occupy the space of cities, fill it with significance by being in it. At the same time, we are occupied with the meanings of the space itself, we concern ourselves with its representation as well as its reputation. We cannot completely isolate our occupation with
cities as objects from our practices of occupying cities.

Nonetheless, even objects we don't physically occupy, objects that we don't fill with meaning that also fill our meanings, are more than mere objects we speak for and about. As tools, hammers have a variety of uses and a range of significations that are, as Wittgenstein has argued, made into hammers—things that we understand as certain kinds of objects that extend our reach and allow us to create and sustain physical interactions with the world as well as our relationships with each other. The object that is a hammer has meaning in its use and its use is a function of language, of how we use words to weave the object into a web of actions and interactions. Reciprocally, language changes with how the tool is used, the use extends vocabularies with which we describe and make meaningful our actions, attitudes, interactions, and relationships.

As objects about which we speak, cities are like hammers. They are objects that we represent in their use, the use of which enriches the possible range of significations and extends actions, perceptions, and relationships. Yet, because we do occupy them, cities are more complex and more rhetorically encumbered than hammers. We move about the physical spaces of cities, infusing those spaces and our movements in those spaces with direction, with meaning, and with significance.

Through their various articulations of urban planning as a kind of speaking about and for the city, planning theorists have borrowed on rhetorical theories and incorporated definitions of literacy into the discourses of urban planning, turning this emphasis on language to the purposes of better comprehending the ideological dimensions of urban planning practice so as to more efficiently educate people to become democratizing urban planners. Such a turn to rhetoric in urban planning does more than create the possibility for a planner such as Robert Beauregard to ask, "If the city could speak, what would it say to us?" Uses of rhetoric in the discourse of urban planning have also enlarged rhetorical strategies and literacy practices by assigning them a spatial significance. Words and their uses in urban planning make the places we inhabit because words make those places meaningful. Attending to such uses of rhetoric and literacy in urban planning can be borrowed back to extend the insights of composition studies into both the spatial significance of rhetorical practices and the rhetorical significance of spatial practices.

Proposals for Literacy Learning in Urban Planning Curricula

Both John Forester and Donald Schon have argued for conceptualizing planning as a primarily discursive practice. Forester in
particular has outlined education in planning in terms of the need to educate planners to use language critically. As far as he has gone in the direction of rhetoric—arguing, for example, that communicative action is fundamental to a critical revision of planning practice—Forester has not gone so far as to claim that planning education is an education in rhetoric. It is worth considering here where and why he draws the line between an education in urban planning and an education in rhetoric.

Forester describes the education of urban planners in terms of the requirement that urban planners in their work negotiate settlements and resolutions among constituencies with competing interests in parcels of land, development projects, or civic spaces. Describing planning as an explicitly interactional profession, Forester draws implicitly on rhetorical theories and concepts. For example, he explains that planning practice is institutionally organized in various government agencies, private businesses, and community groups in ways that distribute discursive agency unevenly, and so directly impact both the process and the outcome of negotiated settlements. By themselves, the claims, statements, and proposals of any individual convey the authority of an organization, producing what Forester calls an instrumental result that reproduces the political and social relations that enabled the negotiation of that result in the first place (74).

In this context, questions about how best to negotiate a decision quickly become questions of the “ethical desirability” of both the processes of negotiation and the resulting resolutions (196). Such questions are ultimately questions of power relations because their answers lie in the institutional organization of agency, authority, persona, and voice. Who has the authority to speak here? How can urban planners redistribute that authority in more ethically desirable ways? In ways that don’t simply serve those in power? In terms of bettering the education of urban planners, Forester argues that the goal of enabling planners who can ask and answer these questions must be central to the urban planning curriculum.

Specifically, his curriculum proposal emphasizes teaching the knowledge and skills that train planners to exercise three types of judgment: technical, practical, and critical. Forester describes technical and practical judgment together as the disciplinary knowledge of planning and the appropriate exercise of that knowledge in negotiating a planning project. Technical and practical judgment are fundamental for any planner. As Forester puts it, “Without practical knowledge and skill, planners with technical virtuosity may find their ideas ill timed, distrusted,
barely heard, and little appreciated. Conversely, without technical skills and knowledge, planners may find themselves appreciated as cooperative people and good talkers, with nothing to say” (75-6). However, Forester is most noteworthy for his third category, critical judgment. The exercise of critical judgment moves beyond the exercise of technical and practical judgment. As Forester puts it:

[T]echnical and practical organizational knowledge alone will not help planners come to grips with problems of equity, the concentrated accumulation of wealth, and the perpetuation of widespread poverty and suffering. Planners who hope to serve fundamental human needs must be able to recognize both the practical forces that work to meet those needs and those forces that serve the interests of the relatively few. Planners need to know that in the instrumental production and sociopolitical reproduction of every organization lie fundamental issues of justice and domination. (76)

Critical judgment matters for planners and in planning because the exercise of technical and practical knowledge and skills is always already organized institutionally and in ways that both disempower people by making them dependent on organizations of authority while also empowering people through the creation of opportunities to utilize those organizational structures. Critical judgment becomes important here because its exercise provides a measure of self-reflection on the processes and products of negotiating institutionally organized opportunities for the exercise of agency, authority, and power.

While compositionists may recognize the motivations of cultural studies and critical pedagogies in Forester’s attention to inequities of power, they may not acknowledge Forester’s proposals as rhetorical education. This does not mean that explicit proposals for rhetorical education are absent from discussions of planning curricula. Leonie Sandercock does explicitly argue for revising planning education in terms of the need for planners to acquire “multiple literacies.” By literacy, Sandercock means an expanded repertoire of theoretical knowledge, approaches to problem solving, as well as attitudes and sensitivities for people and situations. Like Forester, Sandercock proposes shifting attention in education away from a “shopping list of skills, methods, and competencies” toward including consideration of the “kinds of qualities” planning graduates are expected to have (225).

Such language is familiar to compositionists in so far as it echoes the shift from skills, methods, and competencies to qualities that is expressed
in the move from process to post-process writing pedagogies. Proponents of post-process pedagogies do not usurp or discard process pedagogies as much as they critically engage and make strategic use of the skills, methods, and competencies taught through the writing process, turning these lessons to the enlarged purposes of engaging the civic, ethical, and interactional qualities of the act of writing. Similarly, Sandercock’s attention to the qualities expected of urban planners does not discount the need for efficient deployment of planning expertise as much as it enhances that efficiency with attention to critical comprehension.

Sandercock’s five literacies for educating planners are technical literacy, analytic literacy, cross-cultural literacy, ecological literacy, and design literacy. I briefly describe each of these literacies here in order to draw out their parallels to literacy instruction in composition classrooms. The move from technical and analytic to cross-cultural, ecological, and design literacy parallels the move in composition studies from a thin understanding of writing to a thick understanding of writing as, in Reynolds’s words, an act of inhabiting discourse.

Technical and analytic literacies are the fundamental literacies of the field of urban planning. Technical literacy is knowledge of the use of concepts and tools available for performing the work of planning. Analytic literacy is a facility with the strategies and practices of the work of urban planning, “how to think critically about socio-spatial processes, how to understand those processes historically, culturally, institutionally” (Sandercock 226). These two literacies are necessary for urban planners to define themselves as urban planners, as people trained to use their skills, methods, and competencies to self-reflexively contextualize and define certain problems as problems of planning that are nonetheless inflected with politics and power.

Like the skills of planning and revising that writers need, technical and analytic literacies by themselves do not provide planners all the skills, abilities, and qualities they require to do their work as planners because these two literacies by themselves do not prepare planners for meaningful and sensitive interaction in multicultural cities. Sandercock’s next two literacies, cross-cultural literacy and ecological literacy, focus on how planners can use language, as well as their technical and analytic literacies, to interact with diverse constituencies. Cross-cultural literacy “involves learning to work with diverse communities, rather than speaking for them. A respect for cultural diversity must inform the politics and techniques of planning practices if we want to achieve social justice in multicultural
cities" (Sandercock 228). Ecological literacy is concerned with engaging issues of our relationship to our environment and its uses. Such concern is described as an interest in how people communicate; "attention to the issue of change itself is central, and along with that, necessarily more attention to group processes and group dynamics, to interpersonal skills, and to skills of negotiation and mediation as well as skills in facilitating community participation processes" (Sandercock 228-9).

The final quality for planners that Sandercock identifies is design literacy, the capacity to connect acts of creating meaning to the restructuring of space. As Sandercock puts it, "We need to connect the history of struggles over urban space with the poetics of occupying particular places" (230). Characterizing as a poetic act the ways people occupy physical spaces and transform them into meaningful places through a range of verbal and non-verbal representational activities, Sandercock extends and enhances the relationship between our literacy practices and the places in which, and about which, we communicate, negotiate, and represent. Sandercock illustrates the vision of planners using their multiple literacies to enable communication across difference, rather than to advocate for a position, through the Seagrass Project on Westernport Bay in Australia (82). The Seagrass Project focused on raising awareness of the causal relationship between the increase in urban development and the disappearance of seagrass, a vital link in the food chain of the bay. As Sandercock describes it, the Seagrass Project was a three-year environmental theatre project which developed annual dramatizations of the story of the bay in all its environmental and industrial complexity, and which brought together councillors, artists, scientists, business people, conservationists and residents. The theatre performances, which were held at twilight on a park adjacent to the bay which had formerly been a garbage tip, attracted huge audiences. The Seagrass Project helped people to see the problem from a different perspective, helped them to connect emotionally to a particular environment, and to come together in a non-confrontational way to explore solutions to a complex set of problems. (81)

As this brief description of Sandercock’s proposal indicates, attention to literacy can be made central to urban planning curricula in a way that moves urban planning education well beyond immediate concern with literacy practices.
In general, Sandercock’s curricular reform extends and enhances John Dewey’s view that education in geography is essential for all because it is an education in both efficiency and significance. As Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education*, any isolated action is inherently meaningless even though we can assign any number of meanings to it. The isolated act is random. It is not only insignificant, it is also inefficient. Education in geography is an education in the spatial organization of meaningfulness, a kind of place making, that provides us an opportunity to map our actions in relation to others, simultaneously enabling us to act more efficiently—to learn techniques for enlarged action—while allowing us to assign greater significance to our actions—to learn meanings that enlarge our thought. Recognizing the potential antagonism between efficiency and significance, Dewey cautions against too great an emphasis on an education in efficiency at the expense of significance; he also warns against too great an education in significance that threatens to lose touch with efficient action. As Dewey puts it, geography supplies education with “subject matter which gives background and outlook, intellectual perspective, to what might otherwise be narrow personal actions or mere forms of technical skill. With every increase of ability to place our own doings in their time and space connections, our doings gain in significant content. We realize we are citizens of no mean city in discovering the scene in space of which we are denizens” (208). Sandercock’s proposed literacies refi gure urban planning into an activity of place-making, enlarging the vocabulary of Deweyan attention to the spaces of our interactions and providing the literacy tools for critically negotiating demands for recognition and requirements for resources.

The concept of place-making, of situating our actions and our discourses in spaces that then provide us meaning, has been made explicit by Lynda Schneekloth and Robert Shibley. As Schneekloth and Shibley use the term, *placemaking* is a material act of building and maintaining spaces that is at the same time an ideological act of fashioning places where we can feel we belong, where we create meaning, and where we organize our relationships to others. Placemaking “embodies a vision of who we are and offers a hope of what we want to be as individuals and as groups who share a place in the world” (191). We become aware that how we speak, what we say, how it is heard, and what consequences it has structure the places we occupy at the same time that the places we occupy shape our rhetorics. Words and our uses of words assign significance to the places out of which and about which we speak. Our words also establish relationships between ourselves and those others we encounter in social
spaces. We justify going here and not there. We convince ourselves of the need of a road here or a wall there. More than this, the concept of placemaking suggests that our justifications, convictions, and beliefs are as much a function of what we do and where we are as they are of what we say and who we say it to. We go here and not there, we acknowledge these people and not those, because our environments constrain our choices. For Schneekloth and Shibley, a critical awareness of how our words and our deeds combine to establish places and set borders becomes a means for architects and urban planners to build less constraining, more egalitarian environments.

As my brief review suggests, planning theorists have borrowed on rhetorical theories and incorporated definitions of literacy into the discourses of urban planning, turning this emphasis on language to the purposes of better comprehending such things as the ideological dimensions of urban planning practice and more efficiently educating people to become democratizing urban planners. Such a turn to rhetoric in urban planning does more than create the possibility for a planner such as Beauregard to ask if the city speaks. Uses of rhetoric in the discourse of urban planning argue for the enlarged significance of rhetorical strategies and literacy practices. Recognizing the opportunities inherent in this significance, compositionists can borrow rhetoric and literacy back from urban planning, extending the insights of composition studies into both the spatial significance of rhetorical practices and the rhetorical significance of spatial practices.

**Teaching Places in Composition Pedagogies**

Returning to composition studies the claims for literacy education developed in urban planning involves articulating those claims with theoretical issues that define the field of composition studies as a critical reflection on the places of writing. Returning these claims to composition studies leads to practices and results in perspectives that direct the teaching of writing beyond the processes of writing to writing as an act of inhabiting. One consequence for our professional practice is that we should promote forms of literacy, practices of rhetoric, and processes of writing that encourage different, more democratic, habits and practices of placemaking, dwelling, preserving, and inhabiting. Another consequence is that we should work to construct and preserve spaces where democratic habits and related practices of language can be lived.

To make these consequences more concrete, I outline three assignments that I have used in teaching first-year writing. The first
writing assignment draws from Forester’s distinction of technical, practical, and critical judgment in communicative action. This assignment will seem familiar because the goals of developing practical and critical judgment in first year writing would be to prepare students to know how and when to use which writing abilities, as well as to enable students to discern the sources of authority and power that inhabit writing. To make critical judgment explicit, and to connect these judgment-making capacities to spatially located practical judgments, I have students write a version of personal narrative that follows the example of Linda Brodkey’s discussion of having learned to write at her mother’s kitchen table.

In her essay, Brodkey locates her abilities as a writer in the place of her mother’s kitchen where the activities of home life provided specific attitudes, experiences, and habits. After reading and then discussing Brodkey’s essay, I ask students to locate themselves as early writers in a place outside of school where the environment and the people created a setting that continues to inhabit their writing. Having identified a place from which they have acquired practical judgment, the assignment asks students to reflect on that place in order to make explicit how it has informed their capacity for critical judgment. The eventual goal is to make explicit the ways that technical, practical, and critical judgments developed in one setting do and do not translate to another, such as the college writing classroom, figuring out along the way how to make writing inhabited by one place into an activity that can inhabit other places.

Another assignment teaches writing as placemaking. The primary goal for the essay assignment is to have students describe and work through in writing the meanings that a physical landmark acquires through people’s talk about it. The landmark itself can be a monument, a building, or even a street, but it has to be locally well-known. The stipulation that the landmark be well-known is crucial because the evidence for what the landmark means, and the place it becomes through those meanings, must be taken from print sources, such as newspapers and tourist guides, and must be varied enough to provide multiple interpretations.

The landmarks about which there is either much controversy—such as an old or new sports stadium—or a deep tradition—such as a statue or historic site—provide a wealth of print material that contends over the meaning of the place. Landmarks that were once important places that have since become abandoned or have become transformed for use as different places also provide enough contrasting and conflicting claims about the place’s meaning. Again, the purpose is for students to use the many claims for what a place means in order to explicitly locate the
landmark in discourse, which involves further locating the discourses about the landmark in concerns, histories, interests, struggles, or even values. So the place that is the old sports stadium or the crumbling train station or the reclaimed factory is made to mean through discourse about what matters, and students writing through those discourses cannot but inhabit them and through them come to inhabit the landmark with an enlarged perspective.

The final assignment I describe here for use in first-year writing invokes the multiple literacies described by Sandercock. In addition to fundamental technical and analytic abilities, Sandercock proposes that schools of urban planning teach capacities in cross-cultural communication, an ecological awareness that can be described as civic competence, and design literacy understood as the ability to renegotiate the given meanings of the built environment. For the purposes of teaching first-year writing, the five literacies described by Sandercock can be taught through an assignment that resembles a public policy proposal.

In this assignment, students take an issue having to do with current or proposed uses of places or spaces and research the competing assessments of the current or proposed use. While much like the work of writing a research paper, the assignment becomes more by drawing on a version of Sandercock’s literacies to direct the presentation of the research. First, research on competing claims for the use of a place or a space must present the claims as deriving from differences that are not reducible. This is the practical implication of Sandercock’s definition of cross-cultural literacy. Claims from industry leaders for rezoning a residential area will always be different in their appeal as well as in their urgency from the claims of long-time residents opposed to the rezoning. The question of what should be done can only be decided in such cases by something other than the best argument. So students writing about topics such as rezoning must appeal to the ecological and design literacies described by Sandercock. They must present their research on the many claims for rezoning in terms of explicitly stated views on the responsiveness of rezoning claims to the integrity of the location as that location is created through overlapping and often conflicting discourses. Here the goal is to promote an understanding of how researching and writing about a topic is an act of inhabiting a space that may be discursive but that nonetheless has physical consequences.

There are many other ways in which teachers of first-year writing can enact in their classrooms the recognition of writing as an act of inhabiting discourses, and through these discourses, the physical spaces
we share with each other. Whatever ways composition teachers incorporate attention to space, they can go quite far without surrendering literacy instruction to lessons in geography. If the attention to rhetoric and literacy among architects and urban planners demonstrates anything, it is that we inhabit places verbally as well as physically. The point of teaching writing as an act of inhabiting spaces through discourse is to extend to students the capacity to critically evaluate acts of writing that confirm for us democratizing answers to the questions of where we should go, what we should do, even who we should recognize and how we should interact with them.

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Works Cited


