Public Literacy, Social-Process Inquiry, and Rhetorical Intervention: Viewing Students (and Ourselves) as Public Intellectuals


The move toward public writing is an effort to reinstate rhetoric as the heart of effective composition pedagogy.

Gary Olson, qtd. in Weisser ix

In the Foreword to Christian Weisser’s Moving Beyond Academic Discourse, Gary Olson relates a recent conversation with a textbook acquisitions editor. In response to the editor’s query concerning where our profession is headed, Olson responds that (along with promising trends in visual rhetoric and post-process composition) the future of the new decade lies in “public writing, especially as it is linked to service learning” (ix). The excited editor replies (with dollar signs in his eyes), “This is incredible. Practically everyone that I’ve consulted has said the same thing” (Weisser ix). Olson’s response—along with the other nameless “senior compositionists” pooled by the acquisitions editor—validates my own recent interests in curriculum development and serves as rationale for the

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choice of books I’ve included in this essay. Considered together, the three works under review represent different facets of the most important and cutting-edge issues in composition theory and pedagogy. It’s important to note all three works explicitly connect theory and pedagogy—moving social critique and cultural studies beyond postmodern theory to direct classroom application, thereby broadening the audience for post-process pedagogy and encouraging teachers to view both themselves and their students as public intellectuals. Specifically, Elizabeth Ervin’s work is designed as a classroom text; Bruce McComiskey’s project provides a philosophical/pedagogical treatise for teachers; and Weisser’s study gives current discussions of “the public” a historical and theoretical context, while at the same time offering teachers practical advice for both becoming and training public intellectuals—both within and outside the classroom. These works are enormously influential in my current efforts as Writing Program Administrator (WPA) to refigure first-year writing at my institution and to prepare and train the graduate students who will teach this course.

I envision first-year composition as a sequence of ethnographic writing courses in civic rhetoric/writing, based on principles of service learning and public literacy instruction. Indeed, a number of composition teachers have already refigured writing courses along these lines (see course designs in Shamoono, et. al. Coming of Age). Civic rhetoric, ethnographic inquiry, and service learning provide frameworks for preparing our students to enter local communities in hopes of advancing the common good in the face of changing political needs. The first-year course I have in mind borrows from ethnographic research theories and practices, and requires students to actively enter the communities they choose to research. I’ve likewise expanded the focus of our teacher mentoring sessions to include concerns of civic rhetoric and community. The teaching assistants and I are revising curriculum together. Those of us involved in this project are “inventing” a new curriculum and pedagogy—adopting an interdisciplinary approach to writing instruction that is new and exciting for us as teachers and engaging for our students; moreover, we are creating real-world research scenarios and writing assignments tied to community experiences and observations. These efforts are restoring in both graduate and undergraduate students (along with involved faculty) a sense of civic responsibility and accountability—feelings of belonging to one polity and community. Classes viewing students as public intellectuals address what Ervin, in an earlier issue of Composition Studies, has labeled composition teachers’ “increasing dissatisfaction with teaching writing in ways that objectify ‘society’ rather than foster students’ direct interaction with it” (43). The works under review bridge the chasm between disciplinary connotations of first-year writing courses and many teachers’ desires to
engage in a civic-minded philosophy of writing instruction that moves students toward direct rhetorical engagement with local communities. A writing program that promotes civic humanism and encourages students to engage in civic rhetorical practices may perhaps allow teachers and students alike to rethink writing pedagogy, the aims of education, and redefine the term “cultural studies” in relation to communication practices.

**Public Literacy**

Ervin’s *Public Literacy* is a slim text (100 pages) packed with clear explanations of public literacy and the public sphere, wonderfully insightful examples, case studies, and interesting and challenging heuristics. Ervin encourages students to “think rhetorically” in every facet of her novel curriculum, grounded in the pedagogical cornerstones of peer review and the writer’s notebook. Intended as a classroom textbook, *Public Literacy* encourages life-altering behavior; Ervin tells students, “public literacy efforts [are] more meaningful if you see them as advancing your life goals as well as your academic goals” (*Public Literacy* vi). As a method of illustration, Ervin offers flyers, public service announcements, newspapers, signs, and currency as examples of public discourse genres—encouraging students (as a class) to generate a “master list” of public literacy genres as the group makes decisions about how to participate in the public sphere (28). Throughout the pages of *Public Literacy*, students are introduced to people whose “lives have been improved and enriched by public writing” (vi). In addition, Ervin profiles two college students, Tracy and Pedro, who are new to public literacy. Throughout the text, students follow Tracy and Pedro’s experiences engaging in public literacy research and writing. The inclusion of interviews and personal sketches puts a human face on the heuristic/writing exercises and chapter discussions while showing students the feasibility of their own involvement in the public sphere.

In ten unique chapters, Ervin offers a specific pedagogical plan for putting into practice critical issues in composition scholarship. Chapter One, “What is Public Literacy?” introduces students to concepts of “public sphere” and “public discourse,” encouraging students to take advantage of their right to participate in public discourse—in part so they won’t be “taken advantage of by people who participate unethically.” Chapter Two, “Three Configurations of the Public Sphere,” explodes the myth of a general, unified public by naming and defining many public spheres—identifying distinct purposes, locations, and literacy practices for each.

Chapter Three, “Finding and Creating Opportunities for Public Writing,” helps students recognize promising opportunities for participating in national, local, and “everyday” public literacies. In particular, Ervin encourages citizen-students to seek an “understanding of when writing is
the most effective of many possible actions and what it can realistically accomplish in a given situation”—noting risks, benefits, and responsibilities associated with participating in public literacy. Chapters Four and Five—“Making Decisions About Content and Form” and “Research in the Public Interest”—introduce skills commonly taught in first-year writing classes from the perspective of public literacy writing.

In Chapter Six, “Focus on Letters,” Ervin “sketch[es] the rhetorical contours” of four types of letters commonly used for public purposes: letters to editors, letters of concern, appeal letters, and open letters. This chapter transforms a familiar genre into powerful public literacy text. Chapters Seven and Eight, “Focus on Press Releases, Press Conferences, and Press Kits” and “Focus on Grant Proposals,” offer specific (atypical for first-year writing instruction) writing assignments for active participation in public literacy. These unique chapters flesh out the theory of public writing, offering students concrete ways to rhetorically engage in public writing. I know of no other text that offers first-year writing students information concerning the press and grant proposals found in these two chapters. The last two chapters, “Public Literacy and Community Service” and “Careers in Public Literacy,” explore opportunities for public literacy participation in organized groups. Ervin tells students how to put their interests and (newly acquired) knowledge of public literacy into practice. The final chapter on careers is particularly unique and a fitting conclusion to this innovative approach to writing instruction; Ervin profiles careers that require no professional training or degree to enter. Commitment to issues of public interest is the primary requirement for employment.

First-year writing courses configured along Ervin’s theoretical/pedagogical plan do not end at the term’s conclusion. Rather, she is training students for active, long term participation in their own local communities—and arming them with the necessary knowledge and tools to become effective rhetor-citizens. Public Literacy is ideally suited for first-year writing courses based on philosophies of civic writing. We have no other published textbooks so obviously devoted to moving students towards the public sphere. In a conversational style free from didactic morality, Ervin’s work overtly introduces civic writing and offers students concrete heuristics for engaging in rhetorical intervention. This brief work is an excellent choice for students’ first foray into the public sphere; however, I urge teachers to supplement this introduction to civic practice with historical and local readings. Ervin designs the heuristics for adaptation to local communities, but teachers must be forewarned that extensive local research/ethnographic inquiry will often necessitate teacher intervention in accommodating local issues/practices and obtaining access to sites. As an aside, the excellent first edition of Public Literacy, unfortunately, received
little attention or promotion from Longman. Inexplicably, this work is not currently listed on Longman’s web page and is rarely displayed at conference exhibits, although Longman does promote the other two works in this series, Workplace Literacy by Rachel Spilka and Academic Literacy by Stacia Dunn Neeley, at conferences. However, according to Ervin, the second edition of Public Literacy is in progress (available in 2003) and will include updated examples, a chapter on petitions and ballot initiatives, and new interviews. Hopefully, the publishers will recognize this work for the gem that it is and offer Public Literacy the promotion it deserves.

**Teaching Composition as a Social Process**

McComiskey’s *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*, serves as an excellent accompanying TA manual for first-year writing courses with a civic bent. McComiskey’s work, described by James Zebroski as “one of the first books on cultural studies in composition that gets beyond postmodern theory to issues of scholarship and teaching” (book jacket), dovetails nicely with the Ervin text. McComiskey is critical of recent post-process scholarship that promotes notions of the classroom as a site of emerging political awareness and social critique at the expense of writing instruction. In *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*, McComiskey merges the content-rich component of social critique approaches to composition instruction with process pedagogy, resulting in a “social-process” rhetorical inquiry that encourages students to analyze the rhetorical processes of “the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption,” a cyclical process McComiskey claims has been largely ignored in composition scholarship (54). In addition to offering teachers lucid analyses of social-process rhetorical inquiry and the post-process movement in composition, McComiskey provides detailed assignments that teachers might use to move students beyond observations of sites and artifacts towards rhetorical intervention. Like Ervin, McComisky encourages students not only to examine the process of writing, but also to view culture itself as a malleable process—a process open to change through engaged writing.

McComiskey’s student assignments are varied, with traditional writing heuristics/exercises getting a new spin. For example, an assignment asking students to critically examine the culture of work culminates in a heuristic asking students to identify a worksite problem and then to write a letter to a member of the company in a position to improve working conditions. This particular heuristic includes detailed guidelines for analyzing the letter’s audience, the audience’s stance towards the problem, and the rhetorical purpose of the student’s intervention (63-67). Like the “letter to one in authority” assignment, the common “analyze advertising”
heuristic also offers a much deeper rhetorical/social component to a traditional composition assignment and culminates in student intervention. In the advertising heuristic, students are asked to “explore the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption as it relates to magazine advertisements” (44). This exercise leads students to produce “effective rhetorical documents challenging the cultural values that do not serve the interests of a community to which” they belong (45). At every turn, McComiskey reminds students and teachers to view writing as an epistemic process. His use of familiar assignments to illustrate his unique social-process approach greatly increases the chances of teachers adopting/adapting this practical teaching strategy in their own classrooms and strives to make students’ writing experiences authentic as possible.

Specifically, this text is a compilation of six essays (part or all of which were previously published elsewhere) responding to McComiskey’s dissatisfaction with content-driven social theories of composition that largely ignore rhetorical heuristics within writing processes. The chapters are fully integrated and include teaching guidelines and specific references to student work. Several of the chapters attach appendices outlining heuristic exercises. Although these exercises are addressed directly to students and in their present form are immediately available for use in the classroom—McComiskey encourages teachers and students to “negotiate” the heuristics themselves; the exercises are intended to guide and not restrict either teachers or students (4). Teachers new to McComiskey’s pedagogical approach could use these heuristic exercises without modification. Chapter one locates the author’s “social-process” pedagogy within larger textual, rhetorical, and discursive concerns. McComiskey offers a “new map of composition studies,” one that “does not focus on the borders that separate us as writing teachers; instead, it is a map that illuminates our commonalities” (6). Chapter two presents a cyclical model of the “social-process” heuristic for rhetorical inquiry. This model “encourages students to understand language and culture as socially constructive forces (production) conditioned by contexts (distribution) and negotiated by critical subjectivities (consumption)” (20). Chapter three locates social-process pedagogy within the post-process movement in composition studies.

The fourth chapter extends the discussion in chapter three, advising teachers to move students away from “the binary logic of identity/difference oppositions in their critical writing about culture” (75). Using heuristics addressing rap music and work, McComiskey encourages students to adopt active reading strategies (often unfamiliar to entering first-year students) that lead to negotiation of “cultural artifacts, social institutions, and articles about these artifacts and institutions in postmodern ways” (75). In chapter
five, McComiskey argues that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a branch of critical linguistics, has largely been ignored in composition studies but can contribute greatly to social methods for writing instruction and the analysis of the language of cultural texts. Although McComiskey’s concept of CDA may be a bit heady, he fully explains the significance of CDA for composition studies and clearly illustrates his theory in this chapter by including two writing assignments and a social-process invention heuristic based on CDA. The conclusion to chapter five discusses pedagogical methods for teaching both the assignments and heuristic. The final chapter examines “the impact of postmodern culture on students’ ‘academic’ identities” (4) and introduces a series of writing assignments “designed to develop in students certain skills they will need to ‘live’ in this postmodern ‘real world’” (114).

McComiskey’s Teaching Composition as a Social Practice is unique, thoughtful, respectful of students and their writing, and practical. He blends theory and practice in a way that clearly illustrates to teachers the value of cultural studies in the first-year composition classroom, and he offers a rational, well-grounded plan. For teachers and administrators like me—those looking to integrate cultural studies and civic participation based on the principles of classical rhetoric—this work is invaluable for teacher training. The language and concepts, although initially challenging because they are novel, are carefully grounded within the scholarship of composition studies—which serves as an introduction to cultural studies and post-process writing theories for new teachers. Taken together, the Ervin and McComiskey texts are instrumental in helping me solidify ways to improve upon the ethnographic teaching approach by moving students from observation and analysis to direct civic participation and ultimately public writing.

Moving Beyond Academic Discourse

Weisser’s Moving Beyond Academic Discourse:Composition Studies and the Public Sphere, based on his 1999 dissertation of the same title directed by Olson, shows how composition studies’ “recent investigations into publicness, investigations that we have undertaken as teachers, theorists, scholars, intellectuals, and citizens, emerge from a long history of research and scholarship that inquires into how our work as compositionists might be most productive” (133). This text is based on the premise that increasingly, “scholars in composition studies are interested in moving beyond academic discourse, in both the classroom and scholarship, and toward uses of discourse that might have more significance in shaping the world that we live in” (132). Despite his emphasis throughout this work on how compositionists might transform their scholarship to more actively
engage in public dialogue, Weisser does specifically identify with and address teachers, evident in the preface: "I want to begin this book with a note of praise for the many English and writing teachers—at both the secondary and postsecondary levels—who work to bring greater efficacy to student writing by engaging with public audiences and issues" (xi). The preface speaks first-hand of the administrative and organizational obstacles to overcome in involving students in public writing. Weisser recalls specific CCCC conversations among teachers who had designed and taught public writing courses, conversations "replete with images and metaphors" characterizing stories from "war veterans, plane crash survivors, and team athletes" (xii). He tells teachers, "As you enter the trenches of public writing, I hope that this book will help you to better contextualize an issue of great importance in composition studies today: how to move writing instruction into the public sphere" (xii). Weisser encourages compositionists to engage in activist intellectualism, but he also (like both Ervin and McComiskey) intends this scholarly study to provide teachers the necessary tools for helping "students enter, shape, and create discursive domains where their writing takes on an important public role" (xiv). As a complement to McComiskey’s work, Moving Beyond Academic Discourse serves as an important resource for teacher training, providing important historical context for public writing theories and a compelling challenge to composition teachers and theorists to begin viewing themselves and their students/audiences as public intellectuals.

Chapter One, "The Growth of a Discipline: Student-Centered Approaches to Writing Instruction," introduces historical background informing recent discussions of public literacy. This well-documented overview of the profession’s growth summarizes the cognivist, expressivist, and social constructionist views of writing instruction. As required reading for new TAs, this work provides a rich, succinct introduction to composition studies—quite useful for the mainly lit-trained TAs in my program. Chapter two, "Radical Approaches to Composition: The Writing Classroom as a Political and Public Sphere," critically examines more recent "radical" theories in the field that consider writing as a site of political and social engagement. Chapter three, "Social Theory, Discourse, and the Public Sphere: New Perspectives on Civic Space," outlines a fuller theory of the public for composition studies building on the work of Jurgen Habermas. In this chapter, Weisser "envision[s] the public sphere as a contested, historically textured, multilayered, and sometimes contradictory site" (xiii).

Based on the work of Nancy Fraser, Chapter Four, "Rethinking Public Writing: Discourse, Civic Life, and Composition Studies," asks teachers to "problematicize" notions of public writing; Weisser redefines writing assignments and dispels misconceptions about both the public and
public discourse within composition instruction. He includes in this chapter, examples from his own classes and challenges teachers interested in public literacy to reexamine and expand existing notions of student public writing. “Activism in the Academy: The Compositionist as Public Intellectual,” the concluding chapter, suggests ways composition teachers might “become more successful in their attempts to work toward a more democratic society” (xiv). Weisser reminds compositionists that what we do as private individuals informs our academic theories and practices. He asserts that by connecting our engagement with public issues in our private lives, teaching, and scholarship, we “might arrive at a new definition of activist intellectualism, one that takes into account the smaller roles and opportunities that are more readily available to us than the narrow definition of reaching vast audiences in short periods of time” (131).

Weisser takes as his subject matter “current writing courses—and the theoretical and pedagogical discussions concerning them—[that] attempt to prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming their political and social responsibilities, and for lives as active participants in public life” (3). What he contributes to these courses is a rich historical context and broad theoretical base. However, there are redundancies in this work; Weisser tends to restate many of his major arguments throughout the book—perhaps attributable to conventions of the original dissertation form. And the declared audience for this work is “compositionists,” an all-encompassing term that may leave some readers feeling a bit lost in the crowd; overall, however, the book is thoroughly researched and thought-provoking. Those new to composition studies will find it especially useful for mapping out the field’s terrain, and veteran “compositionists” will find challenging the passages exploring the ramifications of our own intellectual activism both inside and outside the academy.

Weisser’s notion of “smaller roles and opportunities” for public engagement is particularly compelling if we view democracy and civic participation not as an ideal, but rather as a way of life—the unifying focus of all three texts under review. Collectively, Ervin, McComiskey, and Weisser’s works inform not only the design of my “public” writing course and preparation of those who will teach it, but also my own scholarship and “activist intellectualism” as I foster public community relationships necessary to the success of this curriculum design. Composition courses based on a notion of civic rhetoric and participation circumvent ongoing debates concerning the content of first-year writing courses. In the course design I’m advocating, rhetorical practice in the local public sphere (and its long history) becomes not only the subject matter and catalyst for skills acquisition, but also the underlying theoretical philosophy informing the class. The focus and content of first-year writing classes ought to be the
exploration of public literacy, an analysis of civic rhetoric, and the mutual student/teacher pursuit of activist intellectualism—a teaching philosophy supported by historical practice, current composition scholarship, and horrifying recent local, national, and world events.

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WORKS CITED
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