
Reviewed by Chris Warnick, University of Pittsburgh

Paula Mathieu’s Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition begins with the claim that composition is experiencing a “public turn” as more and more teachers and scholars consider the different ways that writing outside the academy may animate college writing instruction. This comes as no surprise given the wealth of studies on public writing, community literacy, and service learning over the last decade and the increased focus these topics have received at professional meetings. At last year’s Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Francisco, for instance, individuals could choose from over thirty sessions on “Civic, Public, Community Writing and Service Learning,” a category that didn’t even exist as recently as two years ago. Mathieu herself notes later on in the book that scholarship on service learning in particular has entered what she calls a “second wave” of criticism that calls into question the terms and politics of service learning initiatives. But despite the promise implied in the book’s subtitle, Tactics of Hope is less a critical inquiry into composition’s renewed interest in public writing than it is an important cautionary tale about the problems that well-intentioned teachers, students, and administrators can create when approaching public writing uncritically.

Mathieu identifies at least four different ways by which composition has “gone public”: 1) through courses that examine the complex nature of the public sphere and ask students to make their own writing publicly available, oftentimes on the web; 2) through writing classes that bring civic matters into the classroom by having students engage with local controversies; 3) through service learning and community literacy initiatives; and 4) through ethnographic research on literacy practices and other projects that similarly envision a public role for university intellectuals. Although these approaches toward public writing differ from one another methodologically, Mathieu contends that these and other publicly oriented projects in composition are primarily driven by what she calls “strategic logics,” a perspective that overemphasizes the university’s role in community partnerships. According to these logics, local communities are seen as clients whose problems the university can alleviate; moreover, the success of community partnerships rests on university-determined outcomes, such as what academic skills students learn through public works or how a partnership enhances the educational institution’s mission and/or marketability.
The problem with such a strategic approach, according to Mathieu, is that it often overlooks the community’s needs and vastly oversimplifies the rhetorical situations community workers face as universities try to solve real-time problems according to the academic calendar. Social changes, when they do occur, happen incrementally, over the course of years, not in a sixteen-week semester; in addition, public writing is situational and unpredictable, often responding to immediate and ever-changing circumstances, not to a progressive set of writing goals determined in a syllabus. Drawing on the work of cultural theorist Michel de Certeau as well as the experiences of community activists, Mathieu therefore argues that public writing should be approached tactically, which, as she outlines it, means acknowledging that the outcomes of public writing can’t be predicted in advance and approaching writing as a means to accomplish focused projects rather than tackle systemic, long-term problems. Most importantly, though, thinking tactically requires that teachers and students suspend their desires to resolve a problem with any certainty and instead adopt a critical attitude based on hope, a concept she theorizes using the work of the German philosopher Ernst Bloch. A utopian but not naïve gesture, “To hope . . . is to look critically at one’s present condition, assess what is missing, and then long for and work for a not-yet reality, a future anticipated. It is grounded in imaginative acts and projects, including art and writing, as vehicles for invoking a better future” (19).

The remainder of the book explores this argument by examining several such hopeful “imaginative acts and projects,” including classes and writing projects grounded in Mathieu’s work as a composition specialist and community activist who has participated in the international street newspaper movement, which addresses the issues of homelessness and poverty by creating publications that provide a forum and income for individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. In chapter 2, for example, Mathieu chronicles her experiences putting together a writing group for StreetWise, a paper published and sold in Chicago, and creating, along with other writing group members, a theatrical project entitled “Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour,” in which homeless writers led audiences on a tour throughout the city, offering stories about their lives and experiences in Chicago. Indicative of the provisional nature of public writing, Mathieu admits that the project failed to substantially improve the writers’ material conditions, although it did provide individuals a temporary income, a sense of community, and a space within which to disrupt dominant characterizations of homelessness. Closer to the writing classroom, Mathieu describes in chapter 3 her experience teaching a course entitled “Literatures of Homelessness,” which she designed in consultation with experts on homelessness in Boston, and the range of projects students completed in the class, including a service project in which students helped run sessions at Kids’ 2
Cents, a writing and art workshop founded by Mathieu for children living in Boston-area shelters.

Although Mathieu focuses on public writing broadly speaking, it becomes clear that what she finds particularly troubling is the institutionalization of service learning initiatives, a problem that, according to her, remains under-examined in much of the research on service learning. In chapter 4, Mathieu acknowledges that scholarship on service learning has begun to critically examine the complex ethical questions raised by working in the community, but she contends that this research continues to judge the success of service learning initiatives based on students’ performance and attitudes, not on the degree to which this work contributes to the agenda of community partners. Advocates of institutionalized service learning programs similarly overlook community organizations’ needs when assessing their work, citing a program’s sustainability as the primary indication of success. Given these programs’ frequent emphasis on the general idea of service, rather than on specific community needs, Mathieu believes that formal service learning programs are simply unable to recognize and adjust to the tactical demands writing in the community calls for. As evidence of this, she goes on to cite specific examples where the educational institution’s needs were at odds with those of community organizations, as in cases where teachers sent students out to work in the community without any preparation, where students never handed in a project or left an organization early in a semester, where the relationship between students and those served was marked by distrust. Similar problems have been discussed in other accounts of service learning courses; however, Mathieu bravely turns a critical eye toward her own practice, describing an instance when her strained relationship with the StreetWise organization, which resulted from differences of opinion over the “Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour,” detrimentally impacted another teacher’s service learning course at StreetWise.

A few years ago I designed an introductory professional writing course that asked students to engage with the issue of public writing by creating collaborative projects for different offices and departments on the campus where I teach, and Mathieu’s account of these and other problems made me recall similar failures from my own course. Most students designed creative projects that successfully fulfilled sponsors’ agendas; however, one group failed to deliver their final product to their sponsor, even after months of email requests from me after the semester. As I think back on the planning of this course, I realize that Tactics of Hope, and Mathieu’s insistence that those of us in the academy need to listen more closely to the members of the community we purport to serve, would have helped me foresee, and perhaps avoid, problems like this one. Mathieu’s voice, and the voices of the activists and community members she listens to in her book, will be there when I plan my next public writing
class, and I believe they can further contribute to the discussions of service learning and community writing we have with students in our undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

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Reviewed by Paul Peterson, Oakton Community College

One could potentially argue that despite its burgeoning as an institution in the last four decades, today’s two-year college is rapidly approaching the death knell of middle age; however, a close examination of the essay collection contained in _The Profession of English in the Two-Year College_ illustrates just the opposite. Editors Mark Reynolds and Sylvia Holladay-Hicks are to be commended for compiling a treasure chest of reflective and thought-provoking essays that effectively capture the stories of yesterday’s teaching pioneers, while promoting the crucial role occupied by the two-year college as a significant voice in the postmodern chorus of academic scholarship.

In the Preface to this volume, Reynolds and Holladay-Hicks state that their reasoning for this book “grew out of the editors’ conviction that a historical record of the early years would be valuable for the profession and for future instructors” (vii). Paramount to our appreciation of this text is the reminder that “[d]uring the early years of the 1960s and 1970s, when the great growth in the number of two-year colleges occurred, there were no models for two-year English teachers, so they had to create themselves” (vii). The three-tiered collection addresses the issues of identity, curriculum, and professionalism—all within the scope of the two-year college system from the perspective of those who occupied its classrooms in the early years.

The first set of essays, grouped as “Creating Identities,” begins with a piece by Reynolds and a humanities chair at Alabama’s Davis Community College. Reynolds’s essay provides a compelling overview of the two-year college teacher as a “knowledge maker” as he examines the teacher’s role as a “generalist,” which, in his view, solidifies the teaching expertise of the two-year college instructor (1, 8). Mary Slayter’s “Creating Our College, Our Community, and Ourselves,” Marilyn Smith Layton’s “Lives Worth Fighting For,” and Richard Williamson’s “The Lesson Plan” all offer anecdotal descrp-