
*Reviewed by Timothy Barnett, Northeastern Illinois University*

Having worked on a similar project several years ago, I appreciate the research that went into *1977: A Cultural Moment in Composition*. I believe, as the authors do, in locating specific material contexts of composition in larger cultural, intellectual, and political discussions. Such work adds greater depth to our understanding of social-epistemic rhetorics and, maybe more importantly, holds the potential for animating composition in the public’s eye. Research connecting the perceived “schoolmarmish” culture of composition to larger social and political trends makes visible what most of us in Composition Studies already know: that the study of literacy is significantly connected to the larger narratives of our lives. If politicians, students, and even many teachers begin to recognize these connections, the teaching and study of writing will be enriched.

The authors of *1977* were all members of a graduate seminar on Composition history at Penn State, and the members of the seminar initially set out to historicize various writing programs in Pennsylvania. The authors eventually decided to focus only on the Penn State writing program of 1977, and, in tracing this decision, raise significant historiographical problems for the reader to consider: for example, the difficulty of discovering an appropriate focus for historical analysis and the difficulty of archival research when documents regarding writing programs are typically scarce. Such issues are vital for researchers and students of Composition history alike, and I appreciate the authors’ willingness to take the time to trace their research process and to demonstrate how projects such as theirs develop over time.

Henze, Selzer, and Sharer break down their book into six chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the scholarly project of the book, while chapters 2-4 examine the year 1977 from a number of vantage points. In these chapters, the authors seek to contextualize the Penn State Writing Program, and so chapter 2 lays out the “cultural scene” of 1977, while chapters 3 and 4 discuss national debates in English Studies and Composition Studies in that pivotal year. Chapters 5 and 6 detail the intellectual, administrative, and personal dramas of the 1977 Penn State composition program.

Chapters 5 and 6, the Penn State chapters, are meant to be the heart of the book. We find the most new information in these chapters, and it is in this section that the authors seek to demonstrate “how local phenomena can be explained by larger movements and how larger movements can be understood through local contexts” (back cover). Henze, Selzer, and Sharer
do not always connect the larger context(s) of 1977 and the Penn State writing program as explicitly as such a claim suggests, however, and it is relevant to note that the “contextualizing” chapters (2, 3, and 4) take up more space and—to my mind—are more successful than the chapters on Penn State. Part of the reason for this issue may be that the authors are focusing on an extraordinary amount of material (even as they tried to limit their study to one year). Even more, I think 1977 suggests how difficult it is to write in-depth analytical narratives of composition from archived sources when historians, compositionists, and universities alike have failed to preserve key documents from the field and when the documents that have been preserved often tell a small part of the story.

Before I go any further, though, let me acknowledge that I admire 1977 and will use it in both graduate and undergraduate classes. This text does an excellent job of helping students understand the growth period of Composition as well as Composition’s current position as a significant, yet still junior, member of English Studies. While many of the details shared in 1977 about Composition’s professional development have been discussed elsewhere (as the authors note in their citation of authors like Lester Faigley, Joseph Harris, and Sharon Crowley), this text provides a more readable, multi-faceted, and comprehensive discussion of the period than most. The authors cover Composition in the context of Literary Studies, as might be expected, but they also consider technical and business writing, basic writing, and such things as the major summer seminars run by Janice Lauer and others beginning in 1976. None of these topics are fully explored, of course, but as an introduction to the main themes of Composition’s recent history, 1977 stands out.

This history is further strengthened by the addition of “extra” voices to the text. Henze, Selzer, and Sharer asked major figures in Composition to respond to issues being discussed in 1977, and these responses are included in sidebars to the text. So we get Janice Lauer discussing the seminars she began at the University of Detroit, while others comment on issues such as technology or major sites of writing theory that were developing. Some of these sidebars are eloquent and informative (Hugh Burns’ discussion of his air force career as it led to his work in computers and composition stands out), while others seem somewhat perfunctory, but the addition of these multiple voices lends breadth and perspective to the work.

1977 also provides a model for composition students and future researchers to consider in terms of its historical approach. As difficult as it may be to write archival histories of Composition, I believe we must continue to do so to get a truer perspective of who we are as a discipline, and this text can help prepare the way for others to come. The following critique is offered with this idea in mind.

The main difficulty I have with 1977 is that, while we get a great amount of basic, surface detail about Penn State’s writing program, we do
not get in-depth discussion or analysis of many interesting subjects. We find out, for example, that some of the Penn State English faculty were current traditionalists, while others were influenced by the expressivism associated with Ken Macrorie and others (98). We discover that Penn State faculty were responding to the national debates about process with their own concerns about how, and whether, to teach invention and revision (110-11). We discover that the role of literature in Penn State’s second required writing class was under sharp debate (95-96) and that Penn State faculty, like their peers around the nation, were struggling with the new basic writers arriving on campus as a result of Civil Rights and other movements (88).

These are interesting details, but it is not always clear what we are supposed to do with the fact that national conversations about writing were being mirrored at Penn State, a fact that, ultimately, is not terribly surprising. Henze, Selzer, and Sharer clearly did their homework and consulted a number of texts and people for their chapters on Penn State, and I want to suggest that their efforts created a significant piece of history but also one that is limited by the nature of archival research. Ultimately, it is very difficult to create a dynamic, in-depth story from memos, syllabi, department meeting minutes, interviews, and the like—especially when trying to cover so much ground.

Chapter 6 is more successful than chapter 5 as a discussion of Penn State’s writing program because many of the examples in this chapter offer at least some particular details that help complicate and illuminate the national debates most compositionists are familiar with. In this chapter, for example, we get in-depth detail about the first Director of Composition at Penn State, Wilma Ebbitt, and her struggles to bring order and a new rhetorical content to the university’s first-year writing classes. We learn provocative details about the rhetoric/literature split at Penn State as it connected to the economic problems of the 1970s. Some literature faculty at Penn State, for example, did not want to give up a literature emphasis in composition not just because they were most comfortable teaching fiction but because they saw composition as a way to recruit students to their upper-level literature classes (which were woefully under-enrolled at the time). And so what we often perceive as an intellectual or epistemological debate between composition and literature theorists in this case became a material debate over resources—students—and who was going to influence them most (130). We learn how the new undergraduate writing “program” helped pave the way for graduate studies in rhetoric and composition at Penn State, a further reminder that the material conditions at universities often provoke (and limit) intellectual growth (128).

In chapter 6, in particular, we are on the brink of significant historical analysis, and I was sad to see it end so quickly. The book, along with the chapter, ends in a tantalizing way, but in a way that further reminds us of
the difficulties of archival research and the necessity to save our important (and not-so-important) documents in individual university archives and the National Archives of Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island. Maybe then future researchers who want to write histories from “behind-the-scenes” will have even more material to work with, more stories to tell, and more detail to provide.

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Reviewed by Clay Walker, Wayne State University

As a recent title in the “Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition” series, Elenore Long’s Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics aims to introduce some of the important current views in community-literacy research to those new to the field. Behind this array of scholarship on community-literacy, Long argues, is a single question: how do we engage issues like reading and writing, ethics, and border crossing “in ways and in locales that will make a difference” (3)? Put another way, the question asks “how do ordinary people go public?” The many responses given to these questions, she argues, expose “a whole range of possible relationships between local public and formal institutions” (6). Thus, the purpose of this text is to pull together varying accounts of public engagement by focusing on the central metaphor employed by scholars (e.g., Barton and Hamilton; Brandt; Cintron; Cushman; Flower; Goldblatt; Heath; and Heller) in their efforts to describe local publics. Thus, the heart of the text includes a series of chapters devoted to analyzing current views in the field through an analytical framework organized around the metaphor used to describe a local public (chapters 4-8). This section is followed by a chapter discussing pedagogical implications of local publics research (chapter 9), a glossary of sixty terms relevant to community literacy studies (chapter 10), and a lengthy annotated bibliography (chapter 11).

Although Long’s work is issued as an introductory text, readers already established in the field will find several aspects to be of interest. By focusing on explicating the meaning and implications of local publics to community-literacy scholars, Long’s work carries some important contributions to the field. Aside from offering a complex view of how local publics relate to institutions, individuals, and the literacies they deploy, she also develops a