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## **Review: Nancy Welch. *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*.**

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**M**aking writing meaningful for our students entails, to a great extent, finding a real audience for their ideas. Students, after all, instinctively know they are writing for their instructor, which often turns what should be audience-based decisions into grade-based decisions. The movement toward public writing seems to have considered this need, as real readers not invested in the student earning an “A” enter into the picture. Yet, instructors of writing have struggled to find space for student work outside the classroom, especially for assignments dealing with social or political concerns. Seemingly innovative ideas from years ago—letters-to-the-editor assignments, sharing drafts on electronic bulletin boards, client-based service learning projects, blogging—appeared to have missed the mark in terms of public impact. While dedicated instructors have focused on the New Media and continue to seek ways to have their students’ voices heard, Nancy Welch in *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World* reminds us of the political limitations put upon citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and suggests that any possibility for public success starts with reviewing the history of class and labor struggles.

Highly personal throughout, *Living Room* addresses the deterioration of citizens’ rights, as well as the reduction of space, to speak publicly in a neoliberal world. Welch draws on experience well beyond the classroom, and the book’s application extends to a wider readership than just teachers and students. Welch has analyzed the silence



that neoliberals wish citizens would embrace (although neoliberal rhetoric ironically espouses a commitment to democracy) and sees the constraints the rhetorical and physical acts of politeness impose upon dissenters. In so doing, she raises questions concerning authority. Who authorizes us to speak? How is expertise intertwined with authority? How does authority silence? How is authority seized rather than granted? Throughout is a critique of academia that demonstrates its disconnectedness from effective political action, often through its maintenance of silence.

At her best, Welch uses irony to convey the ridiculousness of situations she confronts. Her early analysis of privacy and privatization comes to life with humorous anecdotes of her family's insistence on keeping matters private, her quitting her job as a secretary, and her time spent working for the treasurer of a famous senate candidate's campaign. Each story serves as a catalyst for deeper understanding of the complexities involved in privacy and privacy rights. In the chapter "This Is Not a Rally" she recounts an on-campus, anti-war panel intent on an open and free dialogue on the matter at hand. When a student asks about the qualifications of one of the panelists—the panelist's right to speak publicly, in other words—he is, himself, silenced by the moderator who invokes the authority of the event organizers to make the decisions on who should speak. Such episodes represent the disjuncture between ideology and actuality and propel readers to ponder the key terms under study: privacy, authority, argument, public, neoliberalism, privatization, and rhetoric.

While Welch has not written a "how-to" volume (she, in fact, advises that not every professor can or should teach courses like the ones she does), certainly her critiques model for instructors the way effective argument unfolds in the public. She rarely leaves behind her classroom, reminding readers throughout of the lessons she has learned from and for her teaching. Yet most of the examples involve extralinguistic and sometimes extralegal activities in order for success to be achieved. In the quest for room to speak and to be heard—to move through the constraints of oppressive notions of privatization—people often have



to abandon the rules of order and decorum. Neoliberalism tacitly encourages students and citizens to leave arguments to experts, that the extent of democratic participation for them begins and ends with elections. Clearly if we are to engage in teaching writing that matters in the public sphere, disruption of the rules that bind us to this message must occur. If nothing else, Welch demonstrates the ineffectiveness of negotiation. Neoliberalism swallows words that seek cooperation in a dialogic process, as power, not logic, dictates outcomes. Welch looks for a rhetorical, perhaps pedagogical, response to the unsustainable conditions of today's world.

Welch further shows the ineffectiveness of individuals acting alone. Her discussion of her husband's cancer early in the volume signifies, among other things, the futility of informed, rhetorical, but nonetheless individualized appeals against systemic deafness. Her valiant student being detained by a police officer after posting her protest poem on a metal utility box reminds readers of the risk of asking students to go public individually. The successes documented in *Living Room* involve people working collectively. Whether it's Welch documenting war protesters confronting and overcoming police barriers, or her review of the labor struggles of the black auto workers organizing the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement in 1968, or her account of the construction of tent cities by students protesting its university's policies on livable wage, the necessity of people working collectively comes through explicitly and implicitly.

With these rich examples of rhetoric and action united, *Living Room* ultimately must make an instructor of writing wonder what the goals of her or his classroom should be. If public argument works through collectivism and often extralinguistic, extralegal actions, teaching a form of writing that privileges the aesthetic of solitary writers' use of evidence and logic and their ability to be clear, concise, correct, and decorous seems plain silly. Why teach a form of argument that does not work when applied to the public world? Welch does not give answers, necessarily, but her ability to tie together seemingly disparate events into a united theory of public argument points the field of



writing studies in a progressive direction that will allow practitioners to theorize for themselves ways to teach students awareness of the dearth of public space in which they can be heard and the many ways to transgress constraints on their ideas.