

Review

Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics

Elenore Long, Parlor Press, 2008

David Coogan, Virginia Commonwealth University

Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics is the sixth book in the Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition series, whose editor, Charles Bazerman, has set out to provide “compact, comprehensive, and convenient surveys of what has been learned through research and practice” on a single topic. The topic here is community literacy, and Elenore Long is a dynamic docent, steering readers through a large gallery of foundational work in this young field. The book provides definitional common ground, a disciplinary genealogy, guiding metaphors for the dominant models in play, a set of pedagogical practices, and an annotated bibliography.

That something like community literacy existed before we had cause to characterize a *field* of community literacy seems reasonable enough, and Long connects the dots between those disciplinary moments in rhetoric, literacy, public sphere theory, ethnography, critical pedagogy, and other cognate fields. Community literacy answers Michael Halloran’s call from 1982 to return Composition to its roots in public discourse about social issues. It hosts what Nancy Fraser has described as the actually existing democracy in counterpublics (as opposed to the idealized democracy in public sphere theory). Critiques of the autonomous model of literacy likewise find form in community writing projects and research, beginning with Paulo Freire’s critique of large scale efforts to eradicate illiteracy and continuing with Brian Street’s turn away from formal linguistics toward anthropology and the subsequent development of an ideological model of literacy. Even the Students Rights to Their Own Languages movement and studies of nonacademic writing, which both took issue with the insularity of academic formalism, become, in Long’s view, touchstone moments of resistance to acontextual and apolitical teaching practices for a field self-consciously concerned with the vernacular and the ordinary.

Community literacy is about ordinary citizens going public. Long argues that all of us are ordinary in this sense: capable of using our literate resources to create local publics, to constitute community through literate acts. Communities are not self-evident groups of people, milling about. They are not physical givens like neighborhoods. Communities are discursive sites enacted through a variety of media around shared exigencies, bound by space and time. How ordinary citizens do this and why we in the university help them—toward what end, with what resources—are the questions organizing the book.

Long has her own metaphors to describe these local publics, some of which we in Rhetoric and Composition have helped to create. The local public could be an impromptu street theater; a cultural womb or garden; a link or gate along a fence; a community organizing effort or a community think tank; or what Ralph Cintron, in *Angel’s Town*, called a “shadow system” or parallel public. She elaborates the features of each guiding metaphor in terms of context, tenor of discourse, literacies, and modes of rhetorical invention. For example, Cintron’s shadow system, based on his ethnographic work in a

working class Latino neighborhood where male gang members are focused on getting respect, displays a “threatening and hyperbolic” tenor. By contrast, Caroline Heller’s book about a writing workshop for poor women in San Francisco’s tenderloin district displays an “uplifting” tenor. Although each of these five chapters ends with a set of implications for readers, Long ultimately leaves it to readers to judge for themselves the difference between going public, say, in Heller’s “garden” and in Cintron’s “shadow system.” This can be frustrating if you are reading cover to cover wondering what Long thinks of it all. But as a reference guide for readers unfamiliar with Cintron or Heller—or for that matter, the community literacy work of Eli Goldblatt, Linda Flower, Ellen Cushman, Paula Mathieu, Jeff Grabill, Deborah Brandt, Shirley Brice Heath, Glynda Hull, and yes, David Coogan—the book fulfills a much needed function.

Long is at her best when she’s parsing diverse approaches to forming community partnerships or designing community writing pedagogies. For example, she updates Tom Deans’s well-known trio of service learning pedagogies—writing with, for, or about a community—by elaborating five community literacy pedagogies. *Interpretative* ones ask students to read public discourse critically and engage community members in writing projects that confront and revise familiar stereotypes. *Institutional* pedagogies teach students how to use professional writing and consulting skills to support stakeholders’ in their work. *Tactical* pedagogies show students how to circulate their own writings to challenge the status quo. *Inquiry-driven* pedagogies teach students how to deliberate across difference with community partners. And *performative* pedagogies teach students how to perform as rhetors and gain “the practical wisdom required to build inclusive communities for problem solving” (p. 48). This kind of break down makes it possible to imagine ordering a sampler of tactical and interpretive. And so long as readers know how to order, this could be generative. Readers prepared to take notes, test options, discuss with colleagues, look up the primary sources or in other ways work with the options that Long lays out will find themselves quite at home with this menu.

The main liability here is that Long’s steadfast objectivity—along with the strategy of presenting the dominant models of community literacy separately without chapter conclusions or a concluding chapter that synthesizes it all—opens up the possibility of ordering something like soup and ice cream in the same bowl. Tactical pedagogies, like Paula Mathieu’s, resist the strategic pull of community think tanks. Ethnographies of literacy, such as Cintron’s or Shirley Brice Heath’s—though they clearly describe local publics—do not intervene in them. Deborah Brandt’s study of sponsorship—how ordinary American learn to read and write from other people—does not even claim the public. Long is aware of these contradictions. She is especially aware of those that complicate the community think tank model that she knows best from her work at Carnegie Mellon University: Goldblatt’s critique of institutional sponsorship and relationship building, for example, and Grabill’s critique of defining community. But she does not worry us with any of it. Long’s intent—and the intent of the series—is to explain what we share and what we don’t share in our efforts to collaborate with community partners in writing projects that can make a difference in local publics. While our methods and motivations may differ, our larger ambitions for these publics and for our discipline are remarkably similar.