



REVIEW

Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement.

Linda Flower, Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

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What makes racial segregation in the United States especially harsh is that it robs most people of the means they need to bring it down. These include mutual knowledge, trust, and, most of all, a language of engagement that can keep people talking past the negativity, hurt, and hopelessness. In *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* Linda Flower argues that such a language can be forged out of a set of powerful rhetorical strategies that disrupt the patterns of power and authority holding segregation and injustice in place. The book chronicles how these strategies have been tested, learned, taught, revised, and articulated over nearly two decades of work at the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh among neighborhood teens and elders, Carnegie Mellon students and faculty, teachers, police, politicians, church and community workers, and civic leaders. Along the way Flower provides a vision for a more full-throated field of rhetoric and writing studies that would be deeply informed by university-community collaborations.

Community literacy is not a set of practices discovered in a community but rather a deliberate product of relationships and processes built on inquiry, dialogue, writing, performance and action in a local public sphere. Neither mere critique nor straight-up advocacy, this is a discourse practice that is open to discovery, accepts conflict and irreducible difference,



reaches not for consensus but for practical resolutions, requires rhetorical competence, builds identifications and arguments, and transforms public interactions. It is a set of shared practices with the same potential implications for everybody involved. At the Community Literacy Center, neighborhood teens and college students organize inquiries around immediate issues (for instance, police harassment, teen pregnancy, employment discrimination). They write, talk and study, then turn their working materials into briefing papers or public performances shared with a wider community. The culminating event might be a Think Tank, which puts teens and their writing (along with their college partners) at a table with members of the Pittsburgh establishment to develop more inclusive frameworks for change.

CLC participants learn to tell what Flower calls *the story behind the story*, the embodied experiences through which a social problem is lived out day-to-day by actual people. The story behind the story disrupts the drift to euphemism and abstraction by which difficult facts are kept from view. Without the story behind the story, too many projects and policies fade into irrelevance and ineffectiveness. Another key rhetorical strategy is *rivaling*—taking the perspectives of others, not in order to capitulate but to reach solutions that recognize those perspectives. Rivaling goes beyond anticipating a counter-argument or being aware that yours is only one view among many. It is about engaging with others so deeply that you come to understand your own view by knowing how it will be experienced by others. Rivaling does not reduce differences or conflicts. It keeps them from being swept under the rug. At the Community Literacy Center, rhetoric becomes the vehicle not simply for persuasion or action but for the growth of cognitive habits needed to rebuild a social contract. When the college mentors write course papers at the end of their semester, they employ these same rhetorical strategies in their scholarly work. When teens interact with their families, peers, teachers and employers, they use and share these rhetorical strategies. According to Flower, 4000 Pittsburgh residents have been exposed to community literacy practices from one position or another since 1990 and are



now potentially carrying them to sites throughout the city and beyond. “Rhetoric,” Flower writes, “places its bets on the power of transformative knowledge, on knowing that how we represent and re-represent our shared reality can change that reality.”

The book provides powerful case studies of community literacy at work. When one Think Tank activates the widely diverging, real-life meanings of the word *curfew* (given distinctly different connotations by urban teens, veteran civil rights workers, hard-pressed single moms, and a well-intentioned social worker), we get down to the studs necessary for the democratic rebuilding of city ordinances and government programs. The book also includes accounts of quieter transformations in the perspectives of individuals: the 14-year-old African American girl who speaks up to the city about the double standard in policing; the white male college student who comes to realize his limits as a role model to black male youth even as he finds ways to stay involved; the white female over-achiever who learns from her black male mentee why standing out in a crowd isn’t always a good idea. We also learn how the CLC uses grant proposals and progress reports to try to alter the way that funding agencies frame problems and measure success.

Throughout the book the experiments at the CLC are contextualized within current debates in rhetoric and composition involving critical literacy, rhetorical agency, identity, and the nature of the public sphere. Aligning herself with the traditions of John Dewey and the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West, Flower does her own bit of respectful rivaling as she represents differing scholarly perspectives and positions. Her deep familiarity with other community-university partnership programs and their arguments also shines through. So the scholarly dimensions of this book are as full as the programmatic ones. In any case, Flower’s wider point is to show how vital community engagement and intercultural inquiry can be to the development of rhetorical theory, especially the kind that stands a chance in the real world. She also



makes a compelling case that the best role for university partners is not in traditional advocacy but in rhetorical mediation: drawing out, documenting, scaffolding and making visible the presence of agency in underestimated communities.

If the Community Literacy Center is the story at the heart of this book, the story behind the story is Flower's own personal and scholarly journey into public engagement, a story she tells with candor and self-objectivity. For anyone who has followed Flower's work since the late 1970s, beginning with her ground-breaking studies in the cognition of writing, this book serves as a fascinating record of the career of an exemplary scholar whose own ideas have continued to prosper through a dedication to persistent inquiry and unflinching engagement with rival perspectives.