

Review

***Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* by Paula Mathieu.**

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The “street” occupies a literal and figurative place in contemporary composition pedagogies. Increasingly, teachers of college writing ask their students to “take to the streets,” providing learning opportunities that range beyond the boundaries of the college classroom. The call for compositionists to engage with the “streets” is not a new one. In fact, the 2002 Conference on College Composition and Communication theme “Connecting the Text and the Street” issued a bold and unabashed call: “We must teach students to use the texts they already own and to compose new texts in ways that affect the quality of lives in the “street,” in all those sites beyond the classroom-offices, hospitals, daycare centers, workplaces, prisons, homes, and homeless shelters” (CCCC Call for Papers qtd in Mathieu 1).

The street, as Paula Mathieu argues in *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, “is the metonymic reference point for those places outside of universities and schools that have become sites of research, outreach, service, or local learning” (xii). While Mathieu acknowledges that the “street” is a problematic term, she finds it more productive than other terms circulating such as “community” or “service sites,” both of which imply an unequal power relationship between those who provide and those

who receive service (xii-xiii). In contrast, street “carries connotations of homelessness, gangs, and poverty” (xiv). While those who are wealthy retreat to the safety of “regulated and semiprivatized spaces, such as gated communities or sidewalks in gentrified neighborhoods,” those who live on the streets or spend time in them live public lives (xiii). Although “street,” is a problematic term, its “problems seem generative” (xiii), prompting teachers and scholars to think about the race, class, and institutional power dynamics of projects that take students beyond the university. As Mathieu reminds us, “taking our teaching and learning to the streets has serious implications” (xiv). *Tactics of Hope* investigates those serious implications and the radical hope for social change that taking community-university partnerships seriously can provide.

As a scholar in Rhetoric and Composition and activist in the international street paper movement, Mathieu first encountered service learning from the vantage point of a community partner who experienced first hand the problems of a “strategic” approach to community-university relations. For nearly a decade, she has worked with the international grassroots non-profit street paper movement “as a teacher, writer, editor, and administrator at two street newspapers” (xvi). She has also taught courses on the topic of homelessness that bridge between the university and the community. Mathieu’s involvement in the international street paper movement provides an interesting backdrop for the entire book. Street papers, of which there are over a hundred, “operate as independent media organizations in 27 countries on six continents” (xvii). The street paper movement allows people who are homeless to have a public voice in the world and to make an income (xvii). Experiencing community-university connections from the vantage points of both the community and the university allows Mathieu to speak with the kind of authority and critical awareness that few of us engaged in community-based learning projects can claim. Through what she refers to as a “double perspective” as a community activist and scholar, she presses readers to reverse the lenses they bring to community-university partnerships: “Instead of looking, studying, and examining outside our schools and universities, we can let those with whom we work outside of campus reflect and speak to us” (xx).

Joining the rich literature on rethinking community-university partnerships

by such scholars as Ellen Cushman, Tom Deans, Linda Flower, Margaret Himley, Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt, *Tactics of Hope* urges readers to reorient from “strategic” to “tactical” logics of community-based learning. Borrowing from Michel de Certeau’s *Practices of Everyday Life*, Mathieu argues that the prevailing logic of most community-university partnerships is “strategic”: “A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, ‘clienteles,’ ‘targets’ or ‘objects’ of research” (de Certeau xx qtd in Mathieu 16). Strategic logics of community engagement presume that the university is the controlling party in the relationship, “determining movements and interactions” and thus creating “institutional relationships with an ‘other’ in the community” (xiv). Moreover, this frame of reference for community-university relations means that universities “seek objective calculations of success and thus rely on spatial markers like sustainability and measurable student outcomes as guidelines of success” (xiv). While the push for institutionalized sustainability in community-university partnerships satisfies university needs, community organizations and groups may have very different needs. As Mathieu puts it, “The more we try to institutionalize the relationships between universities and neighboring streets and communities, the farther we stray from a rhetorically responsive engagement that seeks timely partnerships and acknowledges the ever-changing spatial terrain, temporal opportunities, and voices of individuals” (xiv). A tactical orientation, by contrast, emphasizes a more dynamic and rhetorical approach to university-community partnerships, one which befits the changing “temporal and spatial politics” of the street (xiv). Tactics, de Certeau explains, are those practices we engage “when we do not control the space” (16): “A tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” (de Certeau xx qtd in Matthieu 16).

This shift from the strategic to the tactical is a radical move for many of us in academia since we have come to rely on the typical strategies of academic life: the academic calendar increments of time measured in semesters or quarters, our university mission statements emphasizing community engagement, our quantitative and qualitative criteria for assessing student engagement coupled with our desire for stability, certainty, and the control and flexibility of our own schedules. A tactical approach to community work troubles our

academic certainties, foregrounding the “time challenges, incompatible schedules, the often conflicted spatial politics involved in deciding on whose turf work can and should take place” (37). A tactical approach relinquishes certainty in favor of a relationship of hope. Deploying Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch’s *Principles of Hope*, Mathieu argues that “a tactical logic of “hope” applied in university-community interactions encourages an attitude of questioning motivations, intentions, and practices and listening for responses while striving to enact social change that benefits the communities involved.

Mathieu characterizes the call to the streets as part of a public turn in composition studies that encompasses multiple areas of inquiry: a focus on public writing for students and academics, on addressing social and cultural issues in the classroom, on sustainability and places of writing, on service learning and community-based literacy on activist literacy research and ethnographies, and, finally, on community or street publishing. She provides a quick, but thoughtful overview of the contemporary scholarship in these areas, all the while reminding readers that the public turn in composition studies is actually a “public return,” a term coined by Stuart Brown that has multi-faceted historical, economic, and psychological/spiritual dimensions. Our “public return” in composition studies is, in many ways, a reinstantiation of socially aware pedagogies that have their roots in the theories of Marx, Dewey, Freire, and Gramsci, and in civic pedagogies influenced by classical rhetoric, epistemic rhetoric, feminist pedagogies, and critical pedagogies. The “public return” is also influenced by the economics of the academy, the turn to a post-Fordist, corporatized university that increasingly is concerned with its ability to attract students as “consumers” of higher education and to maintain a sterling public image. While Mathieu acknowledges that service learning scholarship has become increasingly sophisticated in its theorizing about university-community partnerships, she points to the lack of community voices and assessments in the scholarship as a whole (94). This gap can be partially attributed to service learning’s rise as a marketing tool for universities. Although service learning arguably originated from the work of educational reformers/progressives like Jane Addams and John Dewey, the roots of the modern service learning movement are located in the 1980s with the founding of the Campus Compact by the presidents of Brown, Georgetown, and Stanford Universities in an attempt to remake the image of college students

from those who are self-centered and selfish to those who are more community-minded (95). Service learning, then, became a way for institutions to distinguish themselves from one another, a way to show students' connections to the community, a fact shown directly in the expansion of Campus Compact, which now has 900 presidents from two and four-year institutions participating. Mathieu asks: "If the impetus driving service learning is a desire to promote the university as a site of good work, how likely is it that universities will do multiple, meaningful service projects semester after semester, classroom after classroom, in exactly the amount of time a semester allows?" (99).

Although many colleges and universities have displayed a strong orientation toward community engagement for spiritual or political reasons, this approach often contrasts sharply with the "consumer" position of students who may see engaging with the community as a course requirement or as a resume filler. Resisting the logic of strategic university-community initiatives, which can lead to a self-satisfied, "check the box," complete the requirement mentality, Mathieu provides us with tactical ways to engage in public writing and community work.

Mathieu's work with the international street paper movement serves not only as backdrop but also as a critical model of tactical writing. In her third chapter, she describes her work with the StreetWise Writers' Group in the Chicago area where she and a dozen street paper vendors worked on a public performance piece, the "Not Your Mama's Bus Tour" of Chicago. Part street theater, part critique/analysis of the politics and economics of Chicago neighborhoods and streets, the tour sold out and received rave reviews. However, the realities of police, permits, and dissension within the organizational ranks intervened, although a version of the tour has continued over the past few summers. What the example demonstrates, Mathieu argues, is the hope provided by tactical public writing. While one cannot determine that the "Not Your Mama's Bus Tour" changed people's minds about issues of homelessness, street life, and the politics and economics of Chicago, the tour served as a means of creative expression, meaningful social engagement, and community-building, a key example of tactical writing at work. Based on her experience, Mathieu reflects on an open-ended approach to tactical writing assignments in the classroom: a project- rather than problem-oriented space for writing, which she links to classroom projects attempted

by composition scholars Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlburt, Nancy Mack, and Derek Owens.

The development of a tactical writing approach is further illustrated when Mathieu addresses “some of the practical and ethical implications of bringing subject matter from the streets into a writing classroom” (58). Discussing her course on “Literatures of the Homeless” as a case study, she asks readers to see her course not as a model, but as a heuristic, a space from which to think through the challenges of structuring a course that is engaged with the streets. In preparation for the course, she consulted street activists Tom Boland and Marc Goldfinger in Boston, both of whom became co-inquirers in creating the course. As Boland argues, “The best way for academics to connect with those in the streets is to begin without an agenda, to arrive and experience the work and struggles on a personal and human level” (63). Equally important, Mathieu suggests, is addressing how the media frames the issues discussed in the class. All too often, issues like homelessness are framed in moralistic ways or as pro/con treatments with an emphasis on voyeuristically viewing and judging the lives of homeless people. Mathieu argues that shifting the ways these issues are framed by public discussion becomes central to engaging classroom inquiry: “Rather than making the course an interrogation into the lives of people who become homeless, I framed the course as an exploration of the role of writing and literature in shaping popular views and materials realities of this issue” (65).

In her course on “Literatures of Homelessness,” Mathieu continually brought global questions to the issue of homelessness, providing her students with a range of sources for addressing the global-local nexus, including Saskia Sassen’s concept of global cities and two articles by Jahiel and Deutsche that examine how people are made homeless through larger economic processes and institutions. Jahiel, in particular, illustrates how homelessness is affected by those “in the housing, employment, public assistance, and health-care sectors who engage in economic investments that have the unintended effect of adversely affecting the livelihood of vulnerable groups of people” (74). Through mapping the local-global connection, she helps her students remove the context of homelessness from the individualistic narratives that drive popular discourse and helps them see “homeless making” forces at work. Mathieu details the wide range of projects her students

engaged in the course: mapmaking projects, artistic projects, journalism, pedagogical projects, and service projects. Mathieu summarizes them as follows: “I describe these projects as tactical in that they were small but not insignificant interventions designed to do something, whether that something was to inform, entertain, or question. They often combined textual and visual appeals and had a specific rhetorical audience in mind, whether it was the class, members of the campus community or people outside it” (79).

Mathieu also grapples with the different motivations and access to power that universities and community groups have in seeking partnerships. Several key questions emerge: “How many missed connections or inconveniences happen in a typical day or week as universities scramble to make new connections, many of which never get off the ground? How many bridges do universities routinely burn while claiming to serve their communities?” (87). Mathieu urges readers to consider adopting tactical and rhetorically responsive approaches to community work instead of top-down, institutionalized service learning programs.

In the latter half of the book, Mathieu cites examples of problematic attempts by university students and faculty to engage in work with community organizations. These examples glaringly illustrate the typical problems and break-downs in communication between university and community members: university members’ lack of knowledge of the community organizations they seek to “partner” with, a focus on the university/student needs instead of community needs, unrealistic timelines and expectations, and a presumption that the community group’s resources can be tapped and utilized without penalty to the organization. These examples of failed projects are a must read for anyone considering university-community connections as they make an excellent case for the value of tactical projects that “grow from the bottom up, not the top down,” that do “not mandate service of students,” that “consider the community as a source of expertise,” and [that] “acknowledge and seek to work rhetorically within the specificity and limitations of space and time” (106).

If we exercise a tactical relationship to writing, then a tactical relationship to scholarship is likely to follow as well. By way of conclusion, Mathieu provides profiles of three scholars who embody the principles of tactical,

hopeful scholarly work that involves their communities: Sandra Andrews, a graduate student in educational technology; Diana George, a scholar in Rhetoric and Composition, and Howard Zinn, the well-known historian and public intellectual who authored *The People's History of the United States*. These three individuals share “a belief in the value of local knowledge to intervene in and affect national and international debates and frame the role of the academic as facilitation in the circulation of marginalized points of view” (132). These scholars, Mathieu argues, are deeply involved in community work “often through personal connections and investment of time rather than professional decisions or agendas” (132). As is the case with the classroom projects described earlier, these scholars let the concerns of community members and groups determine the direction and outcome of their work. Furthermore, the work produced is not necessarily in the form of academic articles or books, but often takes the shape of public interest articles or projects that directly benefit the community: “The projects are all rhetorical, guided by tactical concerns for timeliness and relevance, which define their form.” (132) In giving us these profiles, Mathieu provides readers with examples of academics who have made community work the center of their professional, personal, and public lives.

Tactics of Hope is an important intervention in the scholarship on service learning and community-based learning. Mathieu writes with self-reflexivity, wit, and passion, providing a useful overview of much of the scholarship on community-based learning and public writing. Her double perspective as a Rhetoric and Composition scholar-teacher and as a street paper community activist allows her an ideal vantage point from which to interrogate the prevailing logic about “strategic” community-based learning projects. By continually posing important questions and examining university-community connections from both sides of the fence, she enacts the tactics of hope that she advocates. Thus *Tactics of Hope* is a must read for all teacher-scholars engaged in community-based learning.