

© 2013, Rebecca Hayes.

Review:

Phyllis Mentzell Ryder. *Rhetorics for Community Action: Public Writing and Writing Publics* (Lexington Books, 2011)

Rebecca Hayes,
*Michigan State
University*

In *Rhetorics for Community Action: Public Writing and Writing Publics*, Phyllis Mentzell Ryder aims to complicate the “real public vs. private service” binary (12) that often circulates in discussions of public writing and service-learning, arguing that to “best study and teach the complexities of public writing, we should partner with multiple community nonprofits” (11). Drawing heavily from her own teaching experiences, Mentzell Ryder expertly weaves together theory and practice to offer teachers and scholars a detailed text of praxis for public writing courses.

After attempts to unite writing courses through rhetorics of social protest and service-learning where she and students soon learned that nonprofits defined social action differently than the literature did, Mentzell Ryder realized that public writing necessitates broad definitions of writing and publics: “the social entities that come together with particular visions of people’s role within democracy” (5). Mentzell Ryder argues against

Deweyan participatory democracy as the only valuable way to engage in public writing or service-learning. Responding to Keith Morton and Sandra Enos' argument against service-learning work with nonprofits because of their corporatized and privatized nature, Mentzell Ryder resists the "charity-change continuum" (43). As an alternative, she creates a matrix of democracy highlighting the range of governing structures, governing purposes, and citizen actions, as a framework to examine visions of democracy. While the work of nonprofit organizations is frequently aligned more with charity than social change, Mentzell Ryder asserts that working with nonprofits and their public writing creates a complex understanding of publics and their formation within democracy.

In Chapter 3, "Public Writing with Community Organizations," Mentzell Ryder establishes four principles of public writing: "public writing is a site of rhetorical struggle" (63); it includes community building and resistance strategies, in addition to more common genres; issues of circulation must be considered alongside issues of composition; academia is one of many publics, and academic writing is one public writing genre. Attention to these principles in pedagogies of public writing offers "students opportunities to recognize the powerful rhetorical arguments embedded within community discourse" (81). These opportunities can develop by working with nonprofits, despite some of their limitations. By selecting nonprofit organizations across issues and approaches to public writing within the matrix of democracy, yet within similar geographic areas, students can examine how different organizations situate themselves within the communities and histories of which they are apart.

Mentzell Ryder argues that nonprofits frequently function as counterpublics by rhetorically challenging and creating alternatives to the idealized public sphere, a space where all people come together to share opinions with the goal of impacting "state action" (100). For example, the National Coalition of Homelessness "Face of Homelessness Speakers' Bureau" brought three individuals who had experienced homelessness to campus to share stories with students. Counterpublics like the Bureau, Mentzell Ryder maintains, resist the idealized public sphere by entering into public discussion as individuals with expertise because of their identities rather than as part of a

collective. This is “a move of a counterpublic, a demand that the assumption about epistemology that undergirds the dominant public sphere be refigured” (141). Mentzell Ryder and her students discuss how the idealized public sphere silences alternatives, critiques, and counterpublics and how organizations situate themselves “between the dominant and counterpublic rhetorics” (154). Chapter 6 contains four detailed case studies of counterpublics, three of street papers and one of the fair-trade capitalism protests against institutions like World Bank, Washington D.C. Drawing from Paula Mathieu’s use of deCerteau’s “tactics” and “strategies,” Mentzell Ryder closely examines the ways counterpublics influence mainstream media to represent their principles.

In Chapter 7, Mentzell Ryder claims that existing scholarship about online publics assumes the “proof of public formation will show up in examples of online deliberation” (204) and the scholarship goes “looking for evidence of democratic deliberation in community-based networks” (206). The assumptions eliminate “the possibility of seeing other rhetorics at work” (208). For example, Miriam’s Kitchen, a soup kitchen her students collaborate with, uses social networking to seek donations and create relationships with donors and volunteers rather than including voices of homeless people in deliberations about homelessness.

In the concluding chapter, Mentzell Ryder turns to her fourth principle of public writing: the academy as a public. Just as Morton and Enos assert that “nonprofits perpetuate a neoliberal set of values and actions” (257), the “...university reinforces neoliberal values” (251). Within that context, Mentzell Ryder contends, “a public writing class needs to start treating the university itself as a kind of public, one with competing visions of its purpose and clashing goals for how to conduct its work” (261). She argues that a close study and practice of public writing and rhetorics prepares students to adeptly navigate disciplinary and other academic writing: “it is easier to introduce the rhetorical tools of public formation by studying the rhetorics of nonprofits, because their very nature as public, nonprofit institutions requires that they continually invoke their public” (269).

Three highly useable appendices, “Some Practical Guidelines,” “Sample Writing Assignments,” and “Sample Community Partner Profiles,” follow the eight rich chapters. The first appendix includes suggestions for instructors of public writing courses to address logistics, such as communicating with nonprofits, tracking students’ hours, creating assignments, and negotiating student needs. The second appendix contains three useable sample assignments for a first-year public writing course with assignment description and steps for students to follow to complete each assignment. The final appendix includes samples of community organization profiles with important details like the organization’s contact information and mission statement, hours and potential activities for service, transportation options, and safety tips.

Rhetorics for Community Action offers scholars and teachers of public writing a wealth of new vocabularies and frameworks for studying and teaching public writing. Through carefully detailed use of public writing theory and pedagogy and careful qualifications of arguments when necessary, Mentzell Ryder complicates notions of the place and possibility of nonprofits in the public sphere and in our public writing classrooms.

Rebecca Hayes is a first-year PhD student in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University with a master’s degree in English Composition from North Dakota State University. Her scholarly interests include community-based writing and pedagogies, activist rhetorics, and queer-feminist rhetorics. Her current research focuses on rhetorics of anti-street harassment activism.