

1 Introduction and Overview

Over the past twenty years that community-literacy studies has emerged as a distinct area of inquiry, scholars have tested the capacity of rhetorical theory to make a difference in the world outside college walls. Working with community partners, they have prepared students in new ways to carry on responsible, effective, socially aware communication in a variety of workplaces and communities, as well as in school. There is joy in much of this work—the fruit of working with people whom we otherwise would not have known on projects that matter to others as well as to ourselves.

A vibrant array of theoretical perspectives and methods of inquiry infuses this work. The array is due, in part, to the complexity and range of issues that community-literacy studies explores—issues of “real-world” reading and writing, of ethical communication, of cultural border crossing, among others.¹ But the variation is also due to something even more basic. Community literacy requires each of us to make a judgment call. It demands that we venture an educated guess in response to a pressing social question: *How do we engage such issues (of reading and writing, ethics, and border crossing) in ways and in locales that will make a difference?* And it demands that we make that call not only in the theoretical claims we assert in our classrooms and scholarship but also in the theory-driven action we take outside the academy—in what we *do* with others under material, social, political, and economic conditions not of our making or under our control, nor even entirely within our understanding. This is, after all, the very conundrum of human affairs that characterizes rhetoric itself as a deliberative domain calling for productive knowledge (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a27–28) and practical wisdom (Isocrates, *Antidosis* 256–57)—the ability to articulate new understandings and to intervene rather than to represent what is already known (Atwill 66–69).

Community-literacy scholars have made this judgment call in a number of ways—for instance, by carefully documenting and sup-

porting the literacies of African American women negotiating the bureaucratic world of social service agencies (Cushman *Struggle*), by cultivating consensus among community organizers for a shared literacy initiative to support adult learners in North Philadelphia (Goldblatt “Alinsky’s Reveille”) and by building the rhetorical capacity of Pittsburgh residents to construct an alternative, inclusive discourse for deliberating issues of shared concern, such as welfare-to-work policies and staffing issues at long-term care facilities (Flower “Intercultural Knowledge”).

Despite this variation, however, such responses share a common theme: we, as everyday people, stand to make a difference by using our literate repertoires *to go public*.

As expressed in Cornel West’s prophetic pragmatism, the promise of going public is twofold. First, public engagement strives to “accentuate [. . . the] humanity [. . .] agency, capacity and ability” of ordinary people “to attenuate the institutional constraints on their life-chances for surviving and thriving” (*Keeping* 29). This means that opportunities for going public are open to all of us who, as “ordinary people,” strive “to participate in the decision-making procedures of institutions that fundamentally regulate [our] lives” (*Keeping* 140). The purpose of this book is to pull together alternative theoretical accounts of public engagement, so I won’t try to encapsulate them all here. But even a quick glance at some public-writing textbooks suggests the range of options available to those looking to go public—from having our say (Charney and Neuwirth) to researching social issues (Collins) to problem solving in the community (Flower *Problem Solving*). So readers of this book—including teachers, researchers and students—are, like myself, ordinary people developing their own literate repertoires for public action.

Second, the promise of public engagement calls readers located in relative institutional privilege to speak wisely and persuasively for social change. To do so is to acknowledge—as West puts it—that the “bourgeois liberal and communist illiberal status quos” have “culturally degraded, politically oppressed and economically exploited” some of us more than others (*Keeping* 29)—another theme in community-literacy studies. Although the goal of leveraging institutional resources to bring about progressive social change is generally shared across community-literacy scholars, it, too, affords multiple theoretical perspectives and multiple conceptions of democratic practice.

Among the questions that organize community literacy as a field of study, this question of how ordinary people go public perhaps best indicates community literacy's relevance to rhetoric and composition at large, especially given "the public turn" the discipline has taken over the past two decades (Weisser 1). Granted, individual researchers don't necessarily state their research questions this way.² All the same, this interest in how ordinary people go public is an abiding one. It shows up not only in rhetoric textbooks, but also whenever literacy scholars draw on a vocabulary of publicness to convey the rhetorical significance of their observations. It also appears whenever literacy scholars look to public-spheres theorists to help them think through rhetorical conundrums of contemporary life.

The question—*how it is that ordinary people go public?*—carries with it several implications. First, the question represents a shift from the academy and workplace, where so much of composition research has previously focused attention, to the community, itself a hybrid domain at the intersection between private lives and public institutions (Crow and Allan 18). The question is also more narrow in focus than two broader strains of scholarship—work in service learning and action research—that frame community-literacy scholarship in the largest sense to include studies of the more private literacies of individuals, families, and neighborhoods (Cushman, Barbier, Mazak, and Petrone).

This question also raises the issue of *where* it is that ordinary people most often go public. In this book, these spaces are called *local publics*. As a rhetorical construct, the phrase *local publics* fills the gap between descriptive accounts of situated literacy (Barton; Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič; Street *Literacy*) and more abstract theories of public discourse. In comparison to both dominant *formal* (Barton and Hamilton; Warner) and *adversarial* (Roberts-Miller) publics, the *local* publics of community literacy extend Nancy Fraser's notion of *alternative* publics. Local publics are located in time and place. Their potential (as well as limitations) as hosts for "actually existing democracy" makes them important sites for rhetorical inquiry (Fraser 109). More than any other entity, local publics constitute the *community* of community literacy.

The question also immediately raises the issue of institutional affiliation. Some of the earliest controversy in community-literacy studies focused on the power of institutions to define literacy. In this

vein, Jeffery Grabill criticized Wayne Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins, founders of Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center (CLC), a partnership between Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) and a settlement house called the Community House on the city's North Side.³ Although Peck, Flower, and Higgins "manag[ed] to define" community literacy for the discipline, Grabill charged them with failing to define community (with all its institutional affiliations) "in any meaningful way" (*Community* 89). Likewise, Eli Goldblatt made institutional sponsorship the focus of "Van Rides in the Dark." "Literacy, like all human activities," wrote Goldblatt, "is practiced within a context of institutions, both institutions whose sponsorship of written language is quite explicit [. . .] or institutions for which written language functions subtly to maintain its solidity in the culture [. . .]" (78). In a hallway conversation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) the year prior to the publication of "Van Rides," Goldblatt gently pointed out to me that the analysis I had just presented insufficiently theorized the issue of institutional sponsorship. At the time, I was coordinating college students serving as writing mentors at the CLC. For me, the revealing relationship was the connection college mentors made between literacy and social justice. In their work supporting urban teen writers at the CLC, they struggled with how best to forge this connection. How to juggle competing priorities (e.g., grammatical correctness, emancipation, free expression, action-oriented problem solving) was a pressing concern for students and an open question in the discipline at large (Long "Intercultural Images").

Since that time, both Grabill (*Community Literacy*) and Goldblatt ("Alinsky's Reveille"; "Van Rides") have stressed the role that institutions play as literacy sponsors, and Deborah Brandt's study of literacy sponsorship has provided theoretical underpinnings for understanding this relationship more fully (*American*). As much light as this work has brought to the issue of sponsorship, it also represents the momentum community-literacy studies has gained while investigating a whole range of problems that arise when literacy is publicly situated. The relationship between local publics and formal institutions is a case in point.

As the following analysis will show, when we ask *how do ordinary people go public?*, the responses we get in return expose a whole range of possible relationships between local public and formal institutions,

sponsorship being one among many. So while the studies reviewed under current views (chapters 4 through 8) have each contributed significantly to community-literacy studies, together they also dramatize a complex (and no doubt incomplete) set of relationships between local publics and formal institutions that shape and constrain how ordinary people go public.⁴ As table 1 suggests, a local public may turn its back on formal public institutions, or it may rely on one or more such institution to sponsor it. A local public may intersect with a public institution, or be forged in partnership with one. Or a local public may outright defy formal, public institutions.⁵

Table 1. Prominent relationships between local publics and formal institutions.

Literacy Scholar/s	Metaphor for the Local Public	Relation to Formal Institutions
Shirley Brice Heath	an impromptu street theater	the local public turns its back on public institutions
Deborah Brandt; Caroline Heller	organic imagery: a cultural womb and a garden	the local public relies on one or more institution to sponsor it
David Barton and Mary Hamilton; Ellen Cushman	a link and a gate along a fence-line	the local public intersects with a public institution
Eli Goldblatt; Linda Flower	a community-organizing effort and the community think tank	the local public is forged in partnership with a formal institution
Ralph Cintron	a shadow system	the local public defies formal public institutions

Together, the studies reviewed in these chapters portray places where ordinary people develop public voices. But to draw implications from the distinctive features of these discursive spaces, the discourses they circulate, and the literate practices that sustain them, we need some sort of heuristic. The local public framework was designed for the job. It is introduced in chapter 2.

Following the format for the Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition, chapter 2 provides key definitions and distinctions. It begins by distinguishing *ordinary people* from those typically depicted

going public, namely political leaders and celebrities. Then it provides a rhetorical definition of *community* for the study of community literacy—a definition rooted in the local publics reviewed in this volume. The chapter then defines key elements of the local public framework: the *metaphor* that frames the account of people going public and its distinctive *features*; the *context* (including *location*) that frames the site; the *tenor* of the discourse; the *literacies* that people in the account use to go public; and the process of *rhetorical invention* they use to figure out what to say, to do, and to write. The chapter concludes by previewing images of community literacy. The chapter suggests that learning to read local publics is an engaging intellectual enterprise and a prerequisite to forging mutually respectful community-university partnerships.

Chapter 3 asks the question: *to what disciplinary priorities can this interest in how ordinary people go public be traced?* The chapter argues that the history of community literacy is tied up in efforts to define the *local public* as an object of inquiry and a site for rhetorical intervention. The chapter suggests that what has attracted community-literacy scholars to local publics is the promise they hold of enacting what Flower has called “a rhetoric of engagement” grounded in relationships and focused on rhetorical action (*Community Literacy* 1). Scholars’ interests in local publics have coalesced around the connection between vernacular literacies and public life—a connection that contends with the inherent ambiguity of language rights discourse and all the complexity of public-spheres studies. The chapter looks at how the ideals of the Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) movement pervade research in community literacy and how community-literacy projects test these ideals by situating them in public domains where vernacular literacies have a place at the table.

The book’s next section, current views, uses the local public framework as a lens for interpreting a range of positions, arguments, and lines of research related to community literacy and for examining possible opportunities for new research, programs, and applications. To do so, current views features, in turn, a series of images of local public life prominent in the literature.

Chapter 4 features the impromptu street theater in Shirley Brice Heath’s ethnography of Trackton, the rural African-American community she studied in the 1970s in the Piedmont Carolinas and described in *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities*

and Classrooms. Theatrical imagery is especially attuned to the performative quality of local public discourse. Thus, chapter 4 draws a parallel between the poetic world-making power of style in written text (e.g., the metaphors researchers use to describe local publics) and the “poetic worldmaking” power of performance (Warner 114), such as those Heath observed on Trackton’s public stage. The chapter also compares Trackton’s public performances to the Native American New Ghost Dance which insinuates local issues into more formal public forums (Lyons).

Chapter 5 features two organic images for local public life: the cultural womb—characterizing the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church (Metro AME) parish to eight of the African Americans whom Brandt interviewed for *Literacy in American Lives*—and the garden, depicting the Tenderloin Women’s Writing Workshop (TWWW) in Caroline Heller’s *Until We are Strong Together*. Both images characterize local publics in relation to their sponsoring institutions; thus, the comparison highlights issues of institutional sponsorship and sustainability. The cultural womb and the garden also enact a rhetoric of transformation in which a local public serves as an “inspired context” for literacy learning (Willinsky 153). The chapter shows that in locations of stress and scarcity, such local publics transform lives through spiritual renewal and transform literacies by revamping familiar practices for new purposes. Somewhat ironically, then, this condition of stress and scarcity—what Brandt calls an “economy of efficiency”—contributes both to a local public’s vibrancy and its vulnerability. The chapter highlights the need for *mestiza* publics (Anzaldúa), capable of supporting the demanding and necessary cultural work of intercultural communication (Fraser 125), intercultural inquiry (Peck, Flower, and Higgins 209), and border crossing (Higgins and Brush 695).

If the cultural womb and the garden featured in chapter 5 use literacy to enact democratic values and practices, the images featured in chapter 6 show just how tenuous the connection between literacy and democracy can be. The chapter features images of local public life at the intersection between private lives and public institutions. *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* is an ethnography of Springside, a working-class neighborhood in England, in the 1990s. Here David Barton and Mary Hamilton depict the private-public intersection as a link. They show that while a community group might

use its literate repertoire to enact democratic values one moment, the group's practices may violate tenets of democracy the next. In Ellen Cushman's *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community*, the local public is a gate—the discursive and physical space between the gatekeeper, on the one hand, and the community resident, on the other. Of all the gatekeeping encounters Cushman documents in the industrial city she calls Quayville, only one affords anything resembling democratic access. Indirectly, Cushman's ethnography asks, *what would it take to teach gatekeepers in training to enact professional identities as knowledgeable advocates and fair judges?* (Long "Rhetorical Education").

Chapter 7 features local publics as partnerships between the community and the university: the community-organizing effort in Goldblatt's "Alinsky's Reveille: A Community-Organizing Model for Neighborhood-Based Literacy Projects" and the community think tank in Flower's "Intercultural Knowledge Building: The Literate Action of a Community Think Tank." These images pose two distinct rhetorics for local public life. On the one hand, a rhetoric of consensus guides Goldblatt's recent effort to help a group of community leaders in North Philadelphia formulate a shared strategy for a literacy initiative called Open Doors. Based on the community-organizing discourse of Saul Alinsky, consensus transforms a problem into an issue for collective action. In contrast, the community think tank is, in part, a response to the frustrations Pittsburgh residents have voiced with community-organizing practices (Flower, "Intercultural Knowledge" 250; Flower and Deems 97). For this think tank, the goal for deliberation is not consensus among group members but the transformed understanding of individual participants made possible through the structured process of collaborative inquiry. The comparison highlights the prevalence of conflict in local public life, as well as tools for maximizing its potential in rhetorical invention. Most of all, the chapter asks: *toward what ends do we, as ordinary people, deliberate in local public spheres?* And, if the ultimate rhetorical art is intervention: *what practices are available (or invent-able) to help us ordinary people get there?*

Chapter 8 features a local public that defies formal public institutions: the shadow system in Ralph Cintron's *Angels' Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life and Rhetorics of the Everyday*. The shadow system mimics the commonplaces so important to mainstream institutions—throwing them back onto the mainstream in forms the mainstream itself

no longer recognizes. Furthermore, the shadow system shelters as its identity the difference between the mainstream's symbol system, on the one hand, and its own mimicry of that system, on the other. In the chapter, I use the shadow system as a lens to read two studies of defiant local publics perhaps more relevant to readers than the street gangs in Cintron's study: Perry Gilmore's 1991 study of girl "steppers" confronting teachers' judgments about them as learners and Phaedra Pezzullo's 2003 study of the Toxic Link Coalition's (TLC) toxic tour exposing corporations responsible for producing and profiting from carcinogenic chemicals. The chapter highlights how structural features of a guiding metaphor (such as Cintron's shadow system) may make visible complex discursive activity and power relations. The chapter also considers conditions under which a shadow system—which perpetuated the logic of violence in Angelstown—may open up a discursive space for trust, tolerance of ambiguity, and human connection.

Chapter 9 takes students as the primary focus of attention and asks: *how do students go public? As educators trained in rhetorical theory and practice, how can we best support them?* The chapter organizes a set of best pedagogical practices around literacies featured in the previous chapters, including *interpretative pedagogies* that adapt textual interpretation—English departments' stock in trade—to community contexts; *institutional pedagogies* that prepare students for future careers as technical communicators, human service workers, and medical professionals; and *performative pedagogies* that yoke inquiry, wisdom, and action and—as we'll see—also push against the very borders of contemporary rhetorical theory. Culled from exemplary rhetoric courses, research projects, and literacy programs, the practices do not rest in easy relation to one another, but rather pose any number of quandaries for educators. The chapter maps alternatives, indicating the kinds of choices and trade-offs educators must make when supporting students' public action.

Following the format for this series, chapter 10 then provides a glossary of terms, and chapter 11 offers an annotated bibliography of selected texts relevant to community-literacy studies.

WHAT THIS BOOK DOESN'T DO

This book doesn't address blogs, virtual urbanism, crowd sourcing, or citizen media. Instead, this book focuses on local publics that are at

once physical and discursive—places where people go public face to face and soul to soul. There are important political reasons for focusing on local rather than virtual publics as Nancy Welch reminds us:

Virtual reality is not a sufficient counter to or substitute for increasingly privatized and regulated *geographic space*. While it's true that information technologies and the virtual communities they create played organizing roles in such historic events as the student takeover of Tiananmen Square and the global demonstrations against a second Gulf War, it was the *physical taking* of Tiananmen Square that made possible its *transformation into a space representing democracy* (Mitchell 148). And it was to prevent such a *material transformation* that New York City cops herded thousands of frustrated protestors into pens on February 15, 2003, far from the rally they'd traveled miles to attend. (487–88, emphasis added)

However, this is not to say that work in community-literacy studies resists digital technologies. In fact, community literacy embraces the potential of multimodality—particularly the “praxis of new media”—to create alternative discourses that respond to complex socio-cultural exigencies (“Toward a Praxis” 111; cf. Comstock 49–50; Hull and Katz; Long, Peck, and Baskins). Pittsburgh’s CLC has sponsored a number of computer interventions to support various forums for intercultural inquiry (Lawrence; Long, Peck, and Baskins; A. Young and Flower). Similarly, the enormous success of Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth (DUSTY)—University of California at Berkeley’s computer-based outreach project—is testament to the synergy that Glynda Hull and her colleagues have harnessed between digital technologies and children’s eagerness to compose stories of identity. Concern for social justice that drives *The Struggle and the Tools* has compelled Cushman to design not only interactive software programs for critical literacy educators in K-12 classrooms but also digitally mediated “third spaces” for collaboration among college students, community members, herself and her colleagues (“Toward a Praxis”). Likewise, Grabill designs his technical writing courses to explore how community-based Web-tools can help “to democratize data” (“Written City” 129). Computer supported pedagogical practices are treated in chapter 9.

Ultimately, much of the political philosophy driving current interest in computer-supported public deliberation (e.g., Gastil and Levine) is also relevant to understanding how ordinary people go public. I anticipate that future work in community literacy will explore the complex relation between local democracy and innovative technologies in further detail.