

Spring 2020

Pedagogy of and for the Public: Imagining the Intersection of Public Humanities and Community Literacy

Jacob Burg
Brandeis University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Burg, Jacob. "Pedagogy of and for the Public: Imagining the Intersection of Public Humanities and Community Literacy." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2020. pp. 130-137. doi:10.25148/14.2.009040.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Issues in Community Literacy
Community Literacy: Where We Stand Now

**Pedagogy of and for the Public: Imagining
the Intersection of Public Humanities
and Community Literacy**

Jacob Burg

Abstract

As a graduate student in the humanities, I am often fearful that my labor is performed for the sake of performing labor. Exacerbated by academia's increasingly precarious landscape, this fear requires a hopeful antidote: a new pedagogy of and for the public. Constructed through empathic conversations between universities and communities, this new approach to public scholarship and teaching relies on the aims and practices of community literacy (e.g. sustainable models of multimodal learning, social justice, and community listening) in order to refocus the humanist's work – particularly the disjointed labors undertaken by graduate students – around the cultivation of publics and counterpublics. In turn, a pedagogy of and for the public also implements the digital frameworks and organizational tools of public humanities projects to enliven community literacy praxis. Graduate student conferences are one site where we could enact this jointly constructed approach. By rearticulating these conferences' capacity for professionalization, by expanding their audience, and by reimagining their form beyond the university context, I argue that we can establish sustainable programs aimed at expanding community literacies.

Who am I writing this for? Presumably, I knew the answer to that question even before typing it – determining one's audience is, after all, an essential feature of any writing process – but for the moment I would like to linger in doubt. So, I ask again, who am I writing this for? That question is a call to action just as much as it is a call for self-reflection, and it is motivated by hope just as much as it is anxiety. As a graduate student in the humanities, I find that it is quite easy to become fearful that my labor is performed for the sake of performing labor. Like the proverbial hamster on a wheel, I write in academic and cultural circles that may at times seem to move quickly and forcefully, but often in fact do little more than stay affixed to their predetermined places within an institutional cage. This, of course, is not a new fear, but in our contemporary moment of precarious employment, rising income inequality, and increased cultural polarization, the fear has taken on a new

and arguably more urgent shape. We are now enmeshed in a system of precarity, which, as James Rushing Daniel describes it, “amounts to a loss of linguistic and discursive agency, rendering [us] obviated from systems of meaning and unable to claim a place in the increasingly abstract world of global capitalism” (64-65). Still, our precarity presents an opportunity for change. Inspired in equal measure by Daniel’s argument that we should treat freshman composition courses, which graduate students such as myself are frequently enlisted to teach, as a precariat enterprise in which “[s]tudents and faculty may cultivate alliances and work to promote their collective interests against a variety of divisive forces” (82), as well as Jessica Pauszek’s discussion of “how our disciplinary methods might be (re)shaped within a context of precarity when working with/archiving the literacy practices of disenfranchised populations,” I argue that we must leverage our precarious position for the purposes of disciplinary change (48). Simply put, academics – especially graduate students in the humanities – need to find hope in our anxiety, and progress in our precarity.

In order to meet this challenge, and to properly answer this article’s animating question, I would like to imagine a new pedagogy of and for the public. Rooted in the aims of community literacy, this pedagogy is not divorced from the university altogether, but rather it is constructed at the intersection of university and community. Between these two interrelated spheres lives a world of possible publics and counter-publics: spaces and forums (both digital and actual) where discourse can circulate effectively amongst a collection of individuals, including those often excluded from, or marginalized within, university-governed conversations. By going public, the pedagogy that I envision is, in many respects, kindred spirits with Frank Farmer’s concept of a disciplinary counterpublic, which provides “an alternative model of public participation for scholars and teachers, one that surpasses our received models that tend to limit us to our fascination with public intellectuals, policy experts, and, to some extent, the varieties of activist scholarship available to us” (20). The issue with these received models is that they run too smoothly, almost thoughtlessly. As with any staid genre of discourse, they have ossified to such a degree that they remain distant from all except those already conversant in their patterns – even when new perspectives are brought into the fold, they are readily integrated into the existing state of affairs. Accordingly, we need to reintroduce a bit of friction. For Farmer, as well as other composition scholars including Linda Flower (“Going Public”), Lisa Zimmerelli (“A Place to Begin”), and Rachael Shah (“Courage of Community Members”), going public opens avenues for modes of community engagement that can destabilize the status quo by recognizing how marginalized individuals produce knowledge. Along those lines, a humanistic pedagogy of and for the public would be grounded in collaborative and accessible writing projects guided by the ethics of community listening in order to establish the conditions within which counterpublics are not simply heard, but also reckoned with and allowed to reshape the publics to which they respond. This is ultimately a risky proposition, not because of the destabilizing outcomes and disruptive modes of public participation that would result from such a pedagogy, but because actually attempting to realize it in the first place involves risk.

Admittedly, there is an air of utopia (one might even say an element of naïve fantasy) to my hope for a new pedagogy that challenges our current modes of public-facing scholarship and teaching. Rather than run from the risk that such utopian thinking entails, we should embrace it. Through the use of community listening practices, which, as Jenn Fishman and Lauren Rosenberg explain, always contain “an element of risk...because responding in an ethical and engaged way to others means being willing to change,” I argue that we can identify the rough edges of our publicly engaged pedagogy, as well as the contours of the precarity within which it is situated (1). Rather than sand these edges down and reify our current practices, listening “gets in the way of ‘smooth’ hegemonic flows” (García 13). When enacted properly, it enlivens old modes of engagement and creates the space for new ones. As such, it establishes the necessary preconditions for the transformation of anxiety into hope, which is a venture that fits squarely within philosopher Ernst Bloch’s notion of hope as a project (here I would like to note that Paula Mathieu offers an indispensable engagement with Bloch’s ideas in *Tactics of Hope*, to which this article suggests a hopeful addition and update). Indeed, hope is “not something one either has or does not, but rather something that can be fostered and practiced by degrees” (Weeks 194). That is to say, hope needs to be fostered at the intersection of community and university through the act of listening – through an “awareness of, as well as responsibility for, being part of an evolving process” – in order for us to realize a utopian arrangement of public discourse (Fishman and Rosenberg 1). Not to be confused with the abstract sense of utopia with which we might be more familiar (i.e. an appealing, but ultimately impossible “no-place”), this realization of public discourse is what Bloch calls a concrete utopia. While expanding this concept in her critique of contemporary models of labor, Kathi Weeks explains that concrete utopianism entails being “cognizant of the historical forces and present potentials that might or might not produce different futures,” while also considering the future “as a more contingent development, with possibilities for significant ruptures and unexpected developments” (196-97). Consonant with Romeo García’s discussion of community listening as a source of friction that “demands that we renew our relationships with one another in more humane ways,” concrete utopianism impedes the smooth and oppressive operations of hegemony by thinking through and beyond the future possibilities that are created and ultimately delimited by our present conditions (García 13-14).

In many ways, I understand the aims of community literacy praxis to be commensurate with Bloch’s concrete utopianism. Accordingly, recent community literacy scholarship offers an initial means of ensuring that we follow that project of hope. For my purposes here, I find Justin Lohr and Heather Lindenman’s review of empathic listening particularly illuminating. As they explain, empathic listening involves “concerted effort on the behalf of an individual or audience member to imagine and internalize a speaker’s words and message and, in particular, to attempt to identify with the speaker by feeling the emotions that the speaker might feel or perform” (75). Furthermore, they argue that it “is a necessary precondition for the kind of collective community listening that can lead to social change” (71). Reframed in this article’s terminology, I contend that empathic listening creates the affective environment in which counter-

public discourses can more effectively influence their antagonistic publics. Subsequently, empathic listening activates both elements and capacities of Bloch's project of hope: first, the rhetorical and performative strategy of emotional self-disclosure helps engage with the affective side of hope in order to populate discursive space with a shared hopefulness between speaker and audience; second, the imaginative labor that emotional self-disclosure asks of its audience also facilitates the cognitive side of hope – that is, hope as a means of thinking through time, of situating history alongside the present in order to better understand collective struggles that were once imperceptible. If my own nagging anxieties and resilient hopes about the state of humanistic inquiry as well as composition scholars' recent investment in the power of publics helps to motivate my desire to articulate a new pedagogy of and for the public, and if Bloch's concrete utopianism provides one central theoretical pillar for this pedagogy, with the principles of community listening providing the other, then empathic listening offers an indispensable first step toward turning theory into practice. Indeed, after moments of empathic listening clear out the necessary discursive space – crucially, not by eliminating participants' associations with concerns of class, race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and (dis)ability, but by highlighting the intersectional effects of those identity markers – only then can we move on to productive forms of public engagement that use community collaboration to support sustainable models of multimodal learning.

While there are many public humanities initiatives in place that hope to produce more engaged work, these initiatives can be usefully reimagined through the principles of community literacy, particularly by the ethics of community listening. As Wendy F. Hsu explains, “we should think of public work in the humanities as a process, not a product,” and in so doing, we necessarily “should do more to include the public at earlier phases of our work.” By considering the public first, we can establish a durable “sense of fellowship between different community agents” that derives its power from its persistent attempts to “recognize the systemic barriers and ongoing injustices inherent to our contemporary moment” (Draxler and Spratt 9). As Bridget Draxler and Danielle Spratt suggest in their discussion of how to make eighteenth century literature more relevant to contemporary audiences, “[w]hen we can take what we've learned in books and apply those same principles to the people in our lives, taking principled action, that is humanities in practice – that is the public humanities” (6). As such, it is not just a matter of expanding our reach beyond university campuses (i.e. the aim of many public humanities projects), it is also a matter of refiguring how we attempt to take those principled actions in the first place. Empathic listening is surely a good first step in our ongoing attempts “to understand better what the community values in order to develop programs that meet the needs they identify” (Rowan and Cavallaro 23). In concert with that strategy, we can implement preparatory listening practices. While these preparations can take many forms, Karen Rowan and Alexandra Cavallaro primarily focus on “identifying community cultural wealth” in order to fight against commonly held and widely circulated deficit narratives (24). For the purposes of the pedagogy I am envisioning, the value of this preparatory approach is that it can alter the types of public humanities projects developed within institutionalized settings by establishing the discursive contexts for new voices.

While these and other recent community literacy practices can and should help formulate a pedagogy of and for the public capable of interrogating the social forces and symbolic systems through which knowledge is produced and received, the tools developed for digital and public humanities ventures can, in turn, refine community literacy practices. Indeed, as we can see from Hsu's description, community literacy and public humanities are deeply related projects: "Using the digital to learn from the public is a listening practice, one that yields more efficacious and engaged public humanities work." Along those lines, the digital frameworks and organizational tools built for and used by public humanities projects (e.g., the NEH's resource guide, the CIC's initiative for the public good, the DC Digital Museum, etc.), as well as the social media used to create and engage with different publics (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.), help expand the ways in which the principles of community literacy can be used to foster public engagement. That is not to say, as if following the logic of a naïve and abstract utopianism, that the digital realm should be viewed as a uniformly productive public sphere. Quite the opposite is true – pitched battles are constantly being waged because many of the same power dynamics present in our offline lives remain present online. Nonetheless, those conflicts, mediated through digital platforms, create unique opportunities. Indeed, the hybridity inherent to these spaces powerfully engages with one of community literacy's central aims, in that it provides us with the opportunity to interrogate the assumptions we bring into the construction of our imagined publics. As Cara Krmptich argues, we must always maintain a "willingness to enter into third spaces," which is a term first used by Homi Bhabha to describe "an out-of-the-ordinary engagement in which people 'mak[e] different presumptions and mobiliz[e] emergent, unanticipated forms of historical agency'" (90, 87). These unfamiliar and estranging engagements open doors of possibility; they introduce friction that can disrupt and then rearrange the flow of information across hegemonic pathways. For example, the creation and maintenance of digital archives often results in collaborative rhetorical pairs that span cultural, professional, geographic, and even temporal distances. Undergraduate students working on research papers can engage with community members curating family albums or organizing local events, or professors developing archival methods, or even businesspeople preparing for a sales pitch. Different interests converge; the challenge is to turn this convergence into a pedagogical opportunity capable of empowering an ever-expanding network of communities.

Open access is certainly one necessary precondition for those productively estranging engagements (this is why ongoing digitization efforts are so important), but so too is a structured and well-informed call to action, such that students, academics of all stripes, and interested parties outside of the university system are each given an entry point that feels native to their experiences. Of course, many public humanities projects already consider how best to elicit help from others – how to crowd source information, as it were – but they also miss the opportunity to turn that initial call to action into a learning experience unto itself. This is where community literacy, especially the empathic and preparatory practices of community listening, can help. In fact, "[i]f public humanities are seeking ways to prolong the encounter with a text,

a person, a memory, or an artifact, then finding ways to stay in and transform the third space – to extend the engagement, and to complicate the ‘I’ and the ‘You’ – is essential” (Krmpotich 90). Empathic listening is one way to extend and complicate that engagement, and the asynchronous immediacy of digital knowledge production is another. Ultimately, by complicating the relationship between discursive agents and their audiences (i.e. the real-yet-digital “I” who addresses some distant-yet-immediate “you”), the digital spaces that are created by many public humanities projects can help us to rethink the possible. By offering us analytical, rhetorical, and pedagogical strategies to highlight the messy and power-laden dynamics of that relationship in the first place, community literacy scholarship can help us to actually realize what is possible.

In order to more fully – albeit still provisionally – imagine how the intersection of public humanities and community literacy can create a humanistic pedagogy of and for the public, I would like to spend the final portion of this article thinking through the form and purpose of graduate student conferences. Often pitched by faculty as an opportunity for professional development, the graduate student conference actually represents a site of untapped potential. By rearticulating their capacity for professionalization, by expanding their audiences, and by reimagining their form beyond the university context, I argue that we can establish a sustainable and mutually beneficial line of communication between the academy and the many publics that it hopes to cultivate. One useful model for this sort of work has been developed at the University of Louisville by Keri Mathis, Megan Faver Hartline, Beth Boehm, and Mary Sheridan. Together, they created the Community Engagement Academy (CEA) and the Digital Media Academy (DMA): the CEA is designed to provide graduate students with the opportunity to “develop intellectual flexibility and practice applying their knowledge to community problems and begin to imagine potential careers outside of academe,” and the DMA is designed to help graduate students “learn the navigational skills to keep their ethical system in the forefront as they determine what ‘doing important work’ looks like *for them*” (Mathis et al. 149, 152). In both cases, these programs work “to promote a more capacious view of stewardship,” such that any decision about what constitutes important work for graduate students is also always already informed by their engagement with a broader community (Mathis et al. 146).

Although graduate student conferences are fairly static in their present formulation, they can and should be reworked in the spirit of programs like the CEA and DMA in order to help graduate students practice new forms of scholarship that will be more sustainable and ultimately more meaningful in the context of our present precarity. Crucially, this would require expanding the audience for such conferences. In addition to Rowan and Cavallaro’s model of preparatory listening and Lohr and Lindenman’s empathic listening, another way for graduate students to address a wider audience and to keep their targeted publics more consistently engaged is through the use of interdiscursive practices. As defined by Vijay Bhatia, interdiscursivity entails “appropriating or exploiting established conventions and discursive resources associated with other genres and social practices” (28). For example, rather than use a standard call-for-papers model to invite participation, graduate student conferences could instead solicit imagined course syllabi, resource guides, business plans, and

other more practically oriented genres of writing that would, in turn, restructure the modes of engagement that occur at the conference itself. Additionally, while funding and other practical matters may limit the duration of a conference in a given location, a sustained dialogue with participants both before and after, guided by the principles of community listening, remains possible through the use of digital and public humanities frameworks. Not unlike the DMA, graduate conferences can shift away from one-time, insular events and toward recurrent, public-facing projects, co-produced by local community members, and driven by shared interests.

One way to accomplish this task is to root interactions between conference organizers, presenters, and the public in spaces. Imagine, if you will, a conference entitled *Community Stories, Community Spaces*. Interdisciplinary and multimodal in nature, this conference would ask participants to create, examine, and/or facilitate the exploration of a story attached to a particular community space. While this approach is certainly related to place-based writing, it is not entirely commensurate with that mode of instruction because it has less of an ethnographic aim and more of a phenomenological and ontological interest in the cultural production of space. Through a kaleidoscopic effort from students, professionals, and community members, a variety of spaces, as well as a variety of perspectives on shared spaces, would be placed in conversation with one another in order to form a (potentially new) community – a public grounded in a shared desire to think through the power of space in our daily lives. Indeed, as place-based writing has demonstrated, grounding discursive exchanges in particular places helps to relieve the distance and disconnection so often felt between academic work and public audiences. There are many ways that we can produce these instructive engagements, but in all cases, space itself must become an important object of inquiry (even if it is ultimately just a secondary, or even tertiary point of interest). Of course, rooted space can be actual space, as in the case of graduate conferences staged in community centers, parks, libraries, or any other public space suitable for mass occupation (and yes, the point would be mass occupation); but rooted space can also be virtually produced, as in the case of conferences performed through digital telecommunications systems, which present the unique opportunity to link archives, field sites, offices, classrooms, and even domestic spaces. The point would be for presenters to select meaningful sites that would help facilitate their contribution to the conference. Whether actual or virtual, cultivating rooted spaces helps our meaning become clearer and also more available to our audiences, at once a present-at-hand object open to theorization and interrogation, as well as a ready-to-hand tool capable of expanding a person's and community's literacy. In the end, that is the entire *raison d'être* of a pedagogy of and for the public. With that in mind, I would like to ask one final time, who am I writing this for?

Works Cited

- Bhatia, Vijay K. "Genre as Interdiscursive Performance in Public Space." *Genre and the Performance of Publics*, edited by Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi, University Press of Colorado, 2016, pp. 25-42.
- Daniel, James Rushing. "Freshman Composition as a Precariat Enterprise." *College English*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2017, pp. 63-85.

- Draxler, Bridget and Danielle Spratt. *Engaging the Age of Jane Austen: Public Humanities in Practice*. University of Iowa Press, 2018.
- Farmer, Frank. *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur*. University Press of Colorado, 2013.
- Fishman, Jenn and Lauren Rosenberg. "Guest Editors' Introduction: Community Writing, Community Listening." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-6.
- Flower, Linda. "Going Public—in a Disabling Discourse." *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen-Scholars and Civic Engagement*, edited by John M. Ackerman and David J. Coogan, The University of South Carolina Press, 2010, pp. 137-156.
- García, Romeo. "Creating Presence from Absence and Sound from Silence." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2018, pp. 7-15.
- Hsu, Wendy F. "Lessons on Public Humanities from the Civic Sphere." *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, edited by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, E-book, University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Krmpotich, Cara. "Public Humanities as Third Space: Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections and the Enunciation of 'We' in Research." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 4, 2016, pp. 82-92.
- Lohr, Justin, and Heather Lindenman. "Challenging Audiences to Listen: The Performance of Self-Disclosure in Community Writing Projects." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2018, pp. 71-86.
- Mathieu, Paula. *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2005.
- Mathis, Keri, et al. "Building Infrastructures for Community Engagement at the University of Louisville: Graduate Models for Cultivating Stewardship." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2016, pp. 146-156.
- Pauszek, Jessica. "Writing From 'The Wrong Class': Archiving Labor in the Context of Precarity." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2019, pp. 48-68.
- Rowan, Karen and Alexandra J. Cavallaro. "Toward a Model for Preparatory Community Listening." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2018, pp. 23-36.
- Shah, Rachel. "The Courage of Community Members: Community Perspectives of Engaged Pedagogies." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2018, pp. 82-110.
- Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Zimmerelli, Lisa. "A Place to Begin: Service-Learning Tutor Education and Writing Center Social Justice." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2015, pp. 57-84.

Author Bio

Jacob Burg is a doctoral candidate in the English Department at Brandeis University. He has taught first-year writing courses for four years, and currently serves as the co-director of the university's writing center. His research and teaching interests include public and digital writing, experiential learning, popular genre fiction, and environmental literature.