

# Community Literacy Journal

---

Volume 12  
Issue 1 Fall *"The Past, Present, and Future of  
Self-Publishing: Voices, Genres, Publics"*

Article 13

---

Fall 2017

## Public Pedagogy in Composition Studies

Marissa M. Juarez  
*Central New Mexico Community College*

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Juarez, Marissa M. "Public Pedagogy in Composition Studies." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2017, pp. 110-115. doi:10.25148/clj.12.1.009123.

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](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

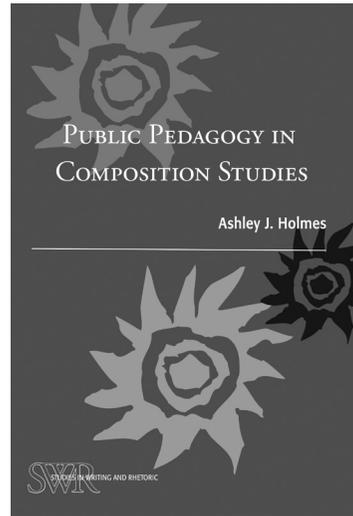
## Public Pedagogy in Composition Studies

**Ashley J. Holmes**

CCCC/NCTE Studies in Writing and Rhetoric  
(SWR) series 2016, pp. 201

**Reviewed by Marissa M. Juárez**

Central New Mexico Community College



As someone who regularly encourages students in my technical writing and first-year composition courses to participate in public writing projects, I have often turned to scholarship based in service learning—often not writing-course specific—to look for pedagogical direction and even evidence that these approaches to teaching are meaningful for students. Fortunately, as more and more rhetoric and composition specialists teach public-oriented writing courses, the emergence of related discipline-specific scholarship, conference presentations, and workshops provides necessary assistance for compositionists whose teaching and work conflate the borders between the institutions and communities in which they teach. Joining the CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric series, Ashley J. Holmes’s *Public Pedagogy in Composition Studies* adds important insights to this body of literature, providing a critical sourcebook for writing program teachers and administrators as they encourage students to “go public” with their work (Mortensen qtd. in Holmes 1). In five chapters, Holmes lays out a comparative case study of three different institutions—Oberlin College, Syracuse University, and the University of Arizona—to offer a definition of public pedagogy specific for writing studies, to illustrate how instructors and writing program administrators at these institutions support this teaching approach in various courses, to demonstrate how our institutional histories might frame our rationales for public engagement, and to theorize ways in which community and institutional stakeholders can negotiate the sometimes difficult emotional reactions to the learning that happens in public spaces. Holmes contends that the teaching and learning that involves and takes place in various publics—that is, outside of conventionally academic locations—not only has transformative potential for students but can also promote opportunities for them to analyze, critique, and respond to the socio-political discourses and policies that shape everyday life. Holmes’s research contributes to ongoing conversations about public engagement in the field of composition studies, and she showcases and documents the on-the-ground work that is being done in three institutions. Thus, many composition

instructors and administrators will find it a valuable guide as they consider, plan, and implement teaching approaches located in the public sphere.

Holmes situates her study within broader conversations about public pedagogy in curriculum studies while also reviewing the body of work produced in response to Peter Mortensen's appeal for rhetoric and composition scholars to move beyond the ivory tower and into the communities where our democracy is practiced. In chapter one, Holmes begins by addressing disparities in the terms composition teachers use to define their publicly-framed work, ultimately arriving at a convincing, albeit broad, definition that accommodates a variety of contexts: "public pedagogy in composition studies . . . [is] an approach to the teaching of writing that values the educative potential for public sites, communities, and persons beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom and/or campus community . . . relocating composition teaching and learning within increasingly public spheres" (4). Acknowledging critiques of public pedagogy by Henry A. Giroux, who argues that such models can be co-opted by neoliberals who endeavor to indoctrinate students into a corporatized, individualistic, and anti-democratic worldview, Holmes argues that public pedagogies must provide students with opportunities not only to learn outside of typical educational spaces but also to "critique . . . those locations, as well as the social and political implications of that public work" (18). The first chapter of *Public Pedagogy*, then, traces the trajectory of the field's public turn; describes Holmes's research sites, selection process, and methods; responds to potential skepticism about public pedagogy's value and effectiveness; and outlines the terms of public pedagogy in composition.

Chapters two and three delve into Holmes's field research to elucidate distinct instructional approaches to public pedagogy and the administrative models that support them. In chapter two, Holmes draws upon Elenore Long's teaching methods for student engagement with public stakeholders (interpretive, institutional, tactical, inquiry-driven, and performative), using them as an analytical reference point for understanding her research participants' public teaching (36). Of interest in this chapter is Holmes's ability to show the breadth of circumstances in which public pedagogies can take place, from a field-based writing course at Oberlin College, to an on-campus collaboration with an HIV/AIDS organization at Syracuse, to students' analysis of local public spaces at the University of Arizona. Even though Long's research proves to be a helpful tool for Holmes's analysis, she asserts that we—as a field—need greater attention to the geographies of public pedagogy. "We must be mindful of location," she writes, and she proposes a paradigm for how teachers might "align location with the educational purposes we have for going public" (57; 59). Chapter three explores the administrative work done to support the kinds of projects Holmes discusses in chapter two, noting that writing programs not only need to cultivate a climate that supports instructors' efforts to go public, but also an adaptable approach to planning its educational programs in order to meet both institutional and community needs (95). Importantly, Holmes demonstrates what programmatic flexibility might look like in practice—for example, by revising in-house publications to reflect a civic direction or by designing course sequencing that allows for the

---

---

continuation of long-term projects—and how malleable administrative methods can result in more productive and sustainable partnerships. Such pliancy, according to Holmes, can help WPAs avoid thinking in limiting, binary terms, and instead adapt to the dynamic needs of both the program and the publics it engages.

Institutional histories play an important role in shaping public pedagogies, as they help programs to gain an informed understanding of their past and present relationship to local communities. Further proving the importance of remaining attentive to the localities outside of college settings, Holmes argues in chapter four that writing programs should use institutional histories purposefully to argue for the benefits, necessity, and relevance of public writing opportunities. Citing the missions of each institutional site in her study, as well as documented public addresses by key administrators, Holmes observes that historical lore often informs the core values and attitudes that shape an institution's strategic direction, such as those related to religion, access, diversity, and land-grant status. She offers that writing programs would be wise to reference common themes in their institution's history in order to defend their public work, while acknowledging—and this is crucial—that doing so may mean silencing underrepresented perspectives. Holmes is careful to remind readers that “we most certainly need more polyvocal historical accounts and counter-stories” that decenter dominant voices, and she does her best to remain critical of the histories that inform her research sites (128).

In her final chapter, Holmes considers the “meaningful, even transformative, learning experiences [that may be possible] for students” who venture into publics with their writing while recognizing that such undertakings are not without difficulty (131). Holmes discusses the potential of adverse visceral responses to public projects; she describes one example in which a student's online reflection is misinterpreted by a community partner to show how the instructor responded to the situation. While difficult moments are inevitable in any learning environment, they may be intensified when a student is dealing with an actual client, a local community or place, or a timely public issue. To navigate such moments, Holmes outlines what she calls “a reciprocal model of care” inspired by feminist pedagogy's commitment to a shared sense of agency in the classroom (133). Holmes concludes the chapter by articulating what may be one of public pedagogy's most important assets: its capacity for disrupting the systems of power that determine who possesses knowledge and where that knowledge exists. She writes: “public pedagogies attempt to shift the loci of power and authority, positioning students and community partners as teachers and teachers as learners, blurring traditionally defined roles” (150). Here, as in earlier chapters, Holmes persuades readers that the epistemological limits of education are not, as some would like to believe, confined to the venerated gates surrounding the academy, nor are they owned solely by those who walk within its perimeters.

*Public Pedagogy* enhances the field's documented investment in courses that use the power of writing for democratic purposes. In addition to providing further evidence that where we write is as important as for whom we write, Holmes imparts writing teachers and administrators with concrete approaches to initiating and supporting place-based projects within and beyond service-learning curriculum.

While Holmes herself acknowledges the limitations of her study, carefully evaluates her stance as a researcher, and openly identifies the areas that fall outside the scope of her project, two specific issues necessitate further discussion, both regarding representation. As someone who teaches at a community college, I am ever vigilant of the field's tendency to overlook the contributions of two-year institutions, particularly in studies concerning teaching and especially considering the expertise of those who work at teaching colleges. I understand that Holmes sought to include a range of institutions and locations, and that it made sense for her to reference writing programs with established public agendas, but I would have liked to see greater variation in the types of institutions she includes, as well as greater attention to the figurative locations (i.e., privileges) of her research sites. By all measures, Oberlin, Syracuse, and the University of Arizona could be considered elite institutions, both in terms of reputation and resources. Holmes herself admits that her pool "is not representative of the diverse programs and schools where composition is taught" and she does not pretend to offer a full assessment of writing programs that comprise the field (8). That said, the absence of community colleges—where the very identity of the institution is embedded within local publics—creates opportunities for those working in this area to investigate and to document what public pedagogies look like in two-year schools and how that work compares to four-year and graduate institutions. Key questions that come to mind include: What advantages do resource-rich schools have in administering public writing curricula, and how does an institution's location, both geographically and socio-politically, determine what it can and cannot achieve publicly? What are the challenges of fostering public pedagogies in community colleges, particularly given funding constraints, faculty workloads, and shorter time-to-degree and transfer periods? Finally, what can we as a field do to promote the efforts of instructors who wish to adapt public pedagogies in their classrooms and colleges but who may lack the support structures that would enable them to do so?

A second point about representation relates to the nineteen research participants in Holmes's study. I did not observe Holmes describe her participants in terms of identification or number of years teaching at any point in *Public Pedagogies*, and perhaps this is because 1) participants chose not to self-identify along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, or ability, or because 2) these markers of identification did not seem particularly salient to the analysis of public pedagogies. Holmes does indicate the job titles of her research participants, revealing a mix of graduate teaching assistants, professors at various levels in their careers, and administrators. Regardless of whether the participants or the researcher chose to bracket identities, many qualitative researchers have written on the necessity of reflecting upon the positionality of the researcher and participants (Fine; Kirsch and Sullivan; Kirsch and Ritchie; Lunsford et al.; Brueggemann; Chiseri-Strater). To ensure a more robust representation of herself as a researcher and of her research participants, Holmes might examine the extent to which participants' locations inform their purpose for adapting public pedagogies, their attitudes and beliefs toward public pedagogies, their understanding of institutional histories and agendas,

and the overall power dynamics that infuse this model. Doing so seems especially important in moments where Holmes discusses instructor approaches to and rationales for social justice-directed writing and in considering how the institutional histories and missions we share and embrace may be differently interpreted based on our positions of privilege. Given the widely shared belief that in asking students to write for public audiences, issues, and places we are inviting them to think critically about systems of inequity and opportunity—a belief that Holmes vehemently and valiantly defends—it only makes sense that we remain attentive to how these systems make their way into our own teaching and locations of teaching.

Issues of representation aside, Holmes's book makes a solid case for pursuing public writing pedagogy while emphasizing that the aim in doing so is much larger than any writing classroom or program or even community; instructors must go public, Holmes asserts, to preserve the greater public good. Given that tenure decisions hinge on a writing teacher's pedagogical effectiveness, publication record, and service to the institution, the need for public pedagogy cannot and should not be undervalued. For far too long, places of higher learning have been understood to be the central location for knowledge production and instructors whose work concentrates on public engagement and activism has too readily been deemed unscholarly or lacking in academic rigor. Books like *Public Pedagogy in Composition Studies* challenge these outdated assumptions, and Holmes, for her part, wisely reminds us that we must dismantle the barriers between academic and public locations in order to demonstrate that the work we do as scholars and teachers has relevance beyond the privileged spaces of our campuses.

**Works Cited**

- Brueggemann, Brenda Jo. "Still Life: Representations and Silences in the Participant-Observer Role." *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Research of Literacy*, edited by Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch. NCTE, 1996, pp. 17–39.
- Chiseri-Strater, Elizabeth. "Turning In upon Ourselves: Positionality, Subjectivity, and Reflexivity in Case Study and Ethnographic Research." *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Research of Literacy*, edited by Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch. NCTE, 1996, pp. 115–33.
- Fine, Michelle. "Working the Hyphens: Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research." *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Lincoln and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Sage, 1994, pp. 70–82.
- Kirsch, Gesa E. and Joy S. Ritchie. "Beyond the Personal: Theorizing a Politics of Location in Composition Research." *College Composition and Communication*. vol. 46, no. 1, 1995, pp. 7–29.
- Kirsch, Gesa E., and Patricia A. Sullivan, eds. *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*. Southern Illinois UP, 1992.
- Lunsford, Andrea et. al. "Forward: Considering Research Methods in Rhetoric and Composition." *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Research of Literacy*, edited by Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch. NCTE, 1996, pp. vii–xvi.