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From the Book and New Media Review Editor's Desk

Jim Bowman

Recommended Citation

4. In this time of growing interconnectedness and economic globalization, what opportunities and challenges face democracy beyond national borders?

We look forward to you joining the conversation.

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As my upper division rhetoric students settled into a service-learning project designed to help develop the communicative capabilities of an organization that provided uninsured and underinsured city residents of Rochester with affordable healthcare, the platitudes flowed easily. They justified the utility of their efforts on safe, ethical grounds. We were "helping those in need" and "supporting a worthy organization." I worried, though, that our "safe" capacity-building work might be conspiring against a more honest look at what drives the differences in perspectives between comparatively privileged college students and the volunteers, staff, and constituents at the healthcare organization we worked with. After screening and discussing Michael Moore's polemic documentary *Sicko*, this benign "cover story" began to take on water. The asymmetric experiences that led to different takes on "healthcare literacy" became part of our own complicated class story. I will probably never know whether these more open discussions of perspectival difference had any impact on the students' work, but I was certainly more confident that our efforts thereafter were done with a great deal more self-awareness of how and why people approach the literacies of healthcare so differently.

In the midst of ambitious community-based projects, educators can sometimes neglect to attend effectively to the different perspectives on literacy held by those in higher education and those in community organizations. The texts and reviews of this edition display this tension productively and explore literacy from many of the diverse positions that inform meaningful collaborations between communities and institutions of higher education. Ben Kuebrich's keywords essay on "community publishing" provides us with valuable insights into the growth and challenges of writing projects that are ideally driven by the needs of community organizations that represent dynamic, evolving constituencies. He notes, for example, the difficulty in measuring the impact of community-based projects and publishing efforts. Those in higher education can better position themselves to gauge the impact of our efforts when they listen to community partners. As he points out, the news of a project's impact will not break in our journals but rather in the daily interactions we share with the communities we serve and for whom literacies matter most. *Literacy in Times of Crisis*, edited by Laurie MacGillivray and reviewed by Patricia Burnes, begins from the given assumption that literacy is embedded in social practices. Attention to how moments of crisis demand, produce, disable, or otherwise affect literate activity affords scholars, teachers and community activists insight into the inescapable power of literacy. For language educators of all sorts who are determined to see their efforts empower others, the collection as a whole provides a message both sobering and inspiring. Linda Flower's *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, reviewed by Christine Martorana, demonstrates how community-oriented academics are at their best when they operate self-reflectively to deploy their own literacy skills

and institutional power to support the complicated work of community activism. And finally, *Writing Home*, the literacy narrative of Eli Goldblatt reviewed by Rebecca Lorimer, provides inspirational nourishment for practitioners of community literacy, whose work can always profit from a critical, descriptive look inward and backward, to the sources of their own personal paths to literacy.

Keywords: Community Publishing

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"Community publishing" sounds like a relatively quaint thing. In fact, the quaintness is built into the term "community." As Raymond Williams noted in his *Keywords*, "community" has always been a "warmly persuasive word" that "seems never to be used unfavorably" (76). Joseph Harris, who builds on and applies William's definition to composition classrooms, gives two warnings about the use of this "vague and suggestive" term (99-101). First, community can be any group, any discourse community, and thus floats as a relatively empty signifier. The second use of "community" distinguishes one group as insiders who have shared purpose, language, and experiences in contrast to others. While more descriptive, Harris notes how this concept of community often glosses over the internal tensions and differences we know to exist in all communities. In *Tactics of Hope*, Paula Mathieu looks for a term to describe her work outside the university, also expressing dissatisfaction with "community." She settles for "street" because "its problems seem generative"(xiii). Most scholars and most of our students live in what they call communities, not in the streets; the street denotes a place outside the university that isn't always warm and favorable.

Despite its shortcomings, community publishing is our keyword, and I hope my opening digression restores some of the concept's ineffable complexities while acknowledging it as a contested phrase. As Miller, Wheeler, and White adeptly note in their keyword on reciprocity, we as a discipline have "resigned ourselves to the term 'community' to refer to para-university communities," not yet able to find a term that accurately represents the partnerships, tensions, connections, and differences of groups that we work with (176). Even while we develop the vocabulary to more accurately describe the practice, community publishing is thriving.

The release of the collection *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing* earlier this year, edited by Paula Mathieu, Steve Parks, and Tiffany Rousculp, marks the high point in a stream of scholarship on community publishing. Its eleven essays, each describing different community publishing projects, demonstrate the creativity of community publishers. *Circulating Communities* builds on the momentum of other recent and influential texts, including Parks' *Gravyland* (2010), *The Republic of Letters* (2009), Linda Flower's *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* (2008), Eli Goldblatt's *Because We Live Here* (2007), and Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope* (2005). The inclusion of community publishing scholarship and community-based writing in a number of recent collections provides yet more evidence of the field's growing interest in community publishing, such as *Writing and Community Engagement: A Critical Sourcebook*, which includes ten pieces written "from the community."

While there is much diversity in community publishing, its shared characteristics normally consist of the following: