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Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement

Linda Flower

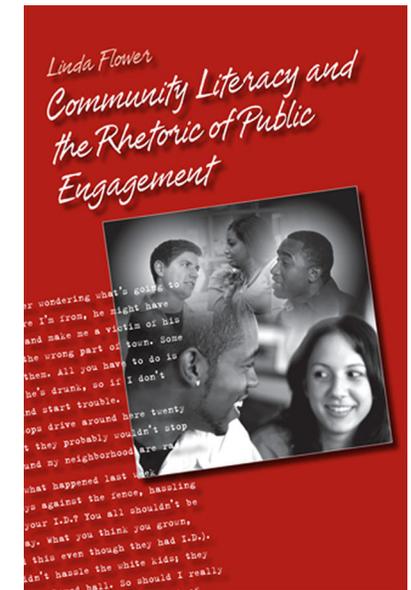
Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 281 pp.
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In 2009, the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) awarded Linda Flower the RSA Book Award for producing that year's best work in rhetorical study. Flower's book *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* spotlights her experiences with Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center (CLC), an innovative project in community literacy initiated in 1990. The 2008 book details a rhetorical model of engaging the privileged and marginalized voices of community leaders, academics and urban teens into meaningful dialogue that values all perspectives and embraces differences as valuable resources. According to Flower, the discourse of academic cultural critique has taught "us how to *speak up* [and] *speak against*" (2 original emphasis). However, what we lack and what this text provides is a model that teaches us "to *speak with* others [and] to *speak for* our commitments [...] for a revisable image of transformation" (2 original emphasis).

The value of Flower's work rests in challenging prevailing social standards in regards to authority and literacy: who speaks, who is given the right to speak, and who is heard. Primarily, she aims to use her work in community literacy to build a platform upon which those labeled as "voiceless and powerless" can stand (6). Although dominant social structures bestow authority upon a select few, Flower seeks to promote a dialogue model that embraces diverse perspectives and experiences.

The book is organized into three main sections. Part 1 (Chapters 1-2) creates a framework for Flower's investigation into community literacy. Part 2 (Chapters 3-5) presents multiple theoretical perspectives within community literacy. Flower labels Part 2 a section "framed by academic debates", guided by her effort to "show academics, mentors, and activists working to construct situated working theories of engagement, collaboration, and empowerment" (73). Part 3 (Chapters 6-10)



concludes the book with specific tools readers can implement into their own community literacy practices.

Chapter 1 introduces the CLC through narrative prose and invites readers to take a tour of Pittsburgh's Northside. Flower's use of vivid anecdotes and participant dialogue sets an informal, conversational tone, a rhetorically-purposeful move as this book challenges readers to consider alternatives beyond traditional academic discourse. In Chapter 2, Flower calls upon her definition of community literacy as "an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* identify as sites of struggle" (19 original emphasis). She posits the rhetorical agency of "everyday people" (44) central to community literacy. Through rhetorical agency, individuals engage in intercultural rhetoric, a dialogue across cultures that seeks to redefine problems in light of personal and public factors and discuss "what if" statements on possible outcomes (53-54). These discussions may lead to the recognition of cultural differences and power imbalances; however, Flower encourages us to embrace these differences "as a resource" (55).

Part 2, which explores different ideas about community literacy, begins with Chapter 3, where Flower analyzes the current bent within composition towards critique. According to Flower, critique only serves to heighten our awareness of "others' in our society" (78). She asks, "How do we prepare ourselves to go beyond the safety of critique into the vulnerable stance of reflective, revisable commitment – to speak *for* values or actions even as we acknowledge them to be our current best hypothesis?" (79 original emphasis). Flower calls for rhetoric and composition to "recover the practice of 'doing' rhetoric in its wider civic and ethical sense" (81). Then, Chapter 4 takes a slight turn from the previous chapters. Here, Flower focuses on her position as a researcher rather than the research itself. In this chapter, she appropriately labels herself "a person of privilege" (100) and considers the various ways to ethically balance this position alongside her work with community members and the CLC. Ultimately, Flower concludes that her privileged position is mediated by the relationships she builds with those around her: "So the question of What am I doing here? can take on a special urgency and feel very much like a problem of identity. Yet [...] identity in this partnership is not something you bring with you; it is not about who or what *you* are. Identity is defined by *the relationships you create*" (122 original emphasis). Chapter 5 shifts focus to various sources of empowerment. Flower outlines three common scripts for empowerment, guided by the questions, "Who is being empowered? To what end? By what means?" (123) After presenting the scripts, she identifies components absent within each and offers a revised empowerment script called "Empowerment through Dialogue across Difference" (132). This script is rooted in "speaking with" others (132) by creating "a circle of collaborative meaning makers" (136). Flower then offers a "working theory of empowerment" (137) developed within the CLC, where indicators of success include "acts of personal decision making, reflective understanding, and rhetorical action" (149). She illustrates this working theory through a CLC case study.

Part 3 provides an enactment of Flower's vision of community literacy. Chapter 6 discusses intercultural inquiry, a dialogue at the heart of community literacy. In intercultural inquiry, different viewpoints are embraced, participants are collaborative equals, and community partners are viewed as agents rather than recipients (157).

Conflict is inevitable – and welcome – in intercultural inquiry; Flower writes that conflicting voices are necessary in order to arrive at "mutually transformative" negotiated meanings (159). Within Chapter 6, Flower offers three CLC case studies to exhibit times when students used intercultural inquiry to effectively construct "meaning through the eyes of difference" (160). Chapter 7 moves the discussion of intercultural inquiry one step further. Flower writes that the desire for dialogue inherent in intercultural inquiry must be accompanied by "a dedicated search for difference" (172). This search for difference translates into a search for situated knowledge – the knowledge and understanding each person possesses based upon history and previous experiences (178). Flower reminds us that the situated knowledge within each person can remain unseen (175). Then, Chapters 8 and 9 center upon the function of rhetorical agency. She challenges readers to "move from the familiar roles of teacher, supporter, or nurturer into the role of a *rhetorical researcher* and a *public rhetorician* – whose work is giving a public presence to the expertise and rhetorical agency of *others*" (223 original emphasis). These chapters neatly tie together the main tenets of the previous chapters, specifically Flower's emphasis on collaboration, community, and dialogue. Finally, Chapter 10 provides a practical, hands-on approach to intercultural inquiry, including suggestions on how to frame a question and bring multiple voices to a discussion, a list of significant areas for further research, a checklist for intercultural inquiry, and possible methods for conducting such an inquiry.

The strengths of this book are readily apparent. First, Flower not only calls us to "recover the practice of 'doing' rhetoric in its wider civic and ethical sense" (81), but she also embodies these words in her actions with the CLC. While some academic scholarship remains forever and only on the page, Flower's theories and suggestions for community literacy extend into daily lives and lived experiences. For example, in 2006, Lesley Rex published an article on the interactions between race and literacy in the classroom. Rex offers a detailed analysis of classroom interactions in regards to race, similar to Flower's observations of the interactions within the CLC and the surrounding community. Rex uses her observations to propose a framework for negotiating "conflict when race is a complicating factor" in the classroom (305). While the literacy framework Rex outlines may prove useful for future scholarship, she does not discuss first-hand experiences employing this framework in the classroom. However, when Flower proposes a framework for community literacy, she calls her readers to "draw out silenced voices and to document the unacknowledged expertise" (224), and she does so alongside her own efforts to do just this. Her words and actions are reciprocal: her words explain her actions; her actions support her words. This fluid and graceful movement between words and actions is one of the most notable strengths of Flower's text and supports Flower in reaching one of her main goals: to ground abstract theories into real practice in order "to construct situated working theories of engagement, collaboration, and empowerment" (73).

Flower's call to engage in community literacy joins a chorus of other voices. The majority of these calls, similar to Rex's research, are situated within classroom walls. Writing teachers are encouraged to engage issues of social justice in order to increase students' community awareness (Camangian; Chapman, Hobbel, & Alvarado), utilize drama pedagogies to encourage student awareness of dialogue

(Gallagher and Ntelioglou), and refer to biographical novels to address matters of resistance and promote cultural responsibility (Hansen). While Flower undoubtedly supports the aforementioned goals, her text moves beyond the classroom confines. Instead of asking students to *write* about social justice issues and the role of dialogue, for example, Flower provides a platform for CLC participants to *engage* in dialogue with community members about social justice issues. Flower's community literacy work responds to Ellen Cushman's recognition of the need to create "long term, well resourced, stable collaborations in inquiry that connect the university with the community" (41). In working with the CLC, she fosters a connection between the classroom and the community, or, as she describes it, "the town and the gown" (101).

Another strength is Flower's distinct style of writing that regularly shifts between narrative, informal writing and traditional, academic discourse. The personal stories about everyday people add familiarity to the text while the academic discussions lend reliability to the theories presented. As readers, we are moved to action because the success of the rhetorical model she presents is evident in the anecdotes, dialogue, and research she shares. Third, a valuable characteristic of the book is Flower's ability to navigate her role as an academic scholar within her CLC work. It is complicated to balance an elevated status as a researcher and scholar with a desire to give a voice to the marginalized outside academia. This is a battle many researchers face, and much can be gleaned from Flower's own struggles in this area. Flower offers us an honest glimpse into her thought progression as she grapples with her positionality. She describes how the privileged must use their voices to speak what the marginalized want to say because culture hears and recognizes the voices of the privileged (216). This book is Flower's attempt to lend the volume of her respected voice to those who are otherwise silenced. However, that respected voice also poses a potential problem.

Given the thoughtful organization of Flower's text, it is worth considering why Flower saved the discussion of her positionality for Chapter 4 instead of discussing this earlier. Possibly, starting with recognition of her elevated status might have detracted from the central components of community literacy she wishes to emphasize. However, from the start of the text, the reading audience is aware of Flower's place of privilege in comparison to the CLC participants, and it might have been effective to acknowledge her positioning earlier than Chapter 4.

Flower may have been more mindful of privilege in Chapter 7, which emphasizes situated knowledge. Here, she assumes an omniscient perspective, one that tends to ignore rather than honor others' situated knowledge. For example, she makes generalizations about thoughts and feelings of others based on age group: "For my generation, [the words] evoked images of Birmingham and Selma, Alabama..." (180), "the young were more likely to envision the police..." (180), there was "angry despair in the middle-aged, and angry shock in the young..." (181). Without explaining how she comes to these conclusions, she teeters on the edge of ignoring each person's unique perspectives, thus distracting from her otherwise fruitful discussion of situated knowledge.

Flower's unintentional omniscience reminds us of the inherent risks within community literacy. Witnessing a researcher as competent and experienced as Flower momentarily slip into this trap reveals how conscious we must be about respecting

each person's individual perspectives. Furthermore, as readers, it is imperative we remember that Flower is the writer documenting the CLC experiences. The text, although inclusive of community members' voices, is Flower's perspective and her situated knowledge impacts the creation of the text.

Regardless of the minor weaknesses, Flower's work is invaluable to CLC participants, literacy studies, and rhetoric and composition. Her experiences with the CLC offer an effective platform for discussing community literacy in action. In offering her own experiences as an example of a scholar stepping into the community beyond academia, she provides a useful template for engaging in and promoting community literacy. Her book offers guidelines for organizing a community literacy project, steps for bringing disparate groups of people to the same conversation, and potential results from such a project. Her position as both a participant within and the author of this book makes the text useful for various audiences. Community literacy scholars will benefit from Flower's example of negotiating her role as an academic community leader, even the moments when her negotiation falls short. Furthermore, those seeking institutional support for a project similar to the CLC will find Flower's research a useful resource. Her in-depth exploration of rhetorical agency will intrigue and benefit scholars in rhetoric, and composition instructors can draw from this as well in light of their interactions with diverse and/or struggling students. Finally, community leaders can gain insight into an academic researcher's perspective and consider how a community can benefit from academia's resources – and vice versa. Flower's recollection of gaining new literacy herself as a result of her time with the CLC showcases the reciprocal nature of community literacy projects. Although there is typically a divide between "the town and the gown" (Flower 101), Flower reminds us that this need not be. Gaining a deeper understanding of both academic and non-academic perspectives is a crucial step in community organizing.

While the primary audience is an academic one, Flower's use of anecdotes and first-hand narrative appeals to non-academic audiences as well. She skillfully weaves together community and academic voices to provide an exciting, thoughtful look at the value of community literacy and the potential struggles and successes awaiting those who practice a rhetoric of public engagement.

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Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography

Eli Goldblatt

Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University P., 2012. 280 pp.
ISBN: 978-0809330850. \$32.00

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The literacy autobiography is often assigned to help writers become more aware of how their literacy pasts affect their written present. In *Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography*, Eli Goldblatt similarly reconstructs his literacy history to contextualize his current literate commitments. In the process, he stretches what he calls "the clinical-smelling term 'literacy'" until it is pliable and durable enough to account for a lifetime of literate experiences beyond books and schools (5). In its exploration of personal language history, *Writing Home* resembles Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self*, Min-Zhan Lu's *Shanghai Quartet*, and Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps*. But Goldblatt's book uses less academic theory than these and lets the social tumult of literacy acquisition speak for itself. The humor and raw candor with which he tells his stories pulls literacy theory out into the daylight of lived experience, showing the full pleasure and pain of finding one's home through writing.

Writing Home is built around the tension between writing alone and writing with others. The desire to bridge community, school, and personal literacies is familiar ground for Goldblatt, but here the taut stretch among these literate realms is given the context of one full life. While the book's chronological chapters follow the phases of Goldblatt's life, the narrative within the chapters often jumps forward and circles back, resembling oral more than written storytelling. As it moves through specific literacy events and practices, the narrative spirals around explorations of gender, race, religion, and class, as one might expect from a writer who takes the social grounding of literacy seriously.

The first two chapters detail Goldblatt's childhood and schooling, beginning on the army base in Germany where his father was employed and ending in a suburban U.S. high school where he finds his poetic aspirations. These two chapters span the longest period of time in the book and contain as many life-altering realizations as any childhood might. Here, Goldblatt's insights are mostly literate: he comes to appreciate school as something he "always knew how to do" no matter where his army

