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Rhetorics for Community Action: Public Writing and Writing Publics by Phyllis Mentzell Ryder

Christina M. LaVecchia
University of Cincinnati

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Rhetorics for Community Action: Public Writing and Writing Publics

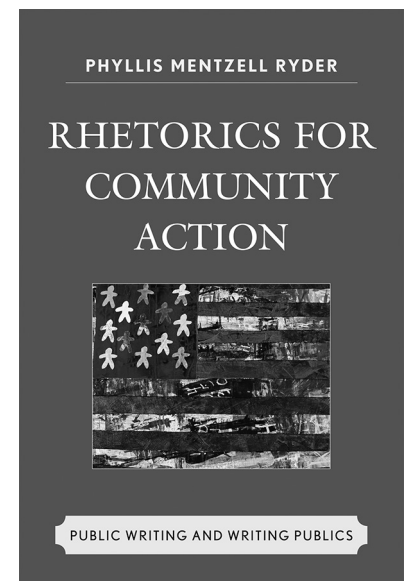
Phyllis Mentzell Ryder

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011. 325 pp.
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Reviewed by Christina M. LaVecchia
University of Cincinnati

In *Rhetorics for Community Action*, Phyllis Mentzell Ryder develops a rich and incisive text that gets to the heart of the rhetorics of publics, community building, and democratic action. Through its approach, the book demonstrates the importance of—and indeed, it was born of—the synergy between teaching and research, practice and scholarship. Ryder spends most of the book unpacking theories and discourses of publics through case studies of community groups in the DC metro area; throughout, she makes it clear that developing our own understanding is beneficial for teaching students. Most chapters close with a section on pedagogical implications (Chapter Three is a particularly robust example), and the book also contains three appendices filled with suggested guidelines for setting up and structuring a public rhetoric course, sample writing assignments, and sample community partnership profiles.

In her introduction, Ryder describes her experiences teaching a service-learning course on social protest to undergraduates at George Washington University and how it led her to reconsider the nature of democracy, public work, and social action. In previous iterations of her course, Ryder had asked students to study theories of the public and social protest and then use those to develop a framework for analyzing the kind of public work being done by partner community organizations. However,



Ryder soon found that her “first course designs did not interrogate any of the competing definitions of democracy and public work but assumed that every non profit operated within a grassroots, community-organizing framework” (7). In other words, Ryder discovered that the public work and social protest methods of these non-profits didn’t neatly fit into the scholarship she had asked her students to read. This focus produced similarly narrow understandings in her students of what public formation and writing was, and it “inadvertently taught students to scorn the very organizations [she] had asked them to work with” (7). She realized that she would have to expand her vision of democratic action and public work and began “allow[ing] the theories about the public . . . introduced in this book to emerge from students’ experience working with and studying the rhetorics of public organizations” (82).

As a result of this realization, Ryder developed a broader understanding of public work, an understanding that forms the underlying core of the book. Ryder draws on Bartholomae’s notion of inventing the university to conceptualize her broader vision of public work, arguing “that when people write (or speak or perform) public texts, they invent the public they wish to address—a complicated but powerful rhetorical move” (11). These moves of public formation are complicated and powerful—a “struggle,” Ryder calls it—because organizations must write and work in a space where there are many competing publics fighting for recognition. Ryder rejects the idea that there is one ideal public against which all publics should be measured, and she instead calls for recognizing the innate multiplicity of publics and public writing.

In Chapter Two “Publics Worth Studying,” Ryder uses an article by Keith Morton and Sandra Enos to frame her central argument that too often, scholars work from a narrow a view of what “public” work is and privilege social change organizations as doing the “best” kind of public work. Nonprofits *can* enact democracy and question the status quo, Ryder argues, because there is more to public agency than “trying to effect change through government” (42): personal decisions and behaviors can change lives, and so “the act of choosing is [also] an act of resistance” (53). What’s especially valuable about this chapter, particularly for *Community Literacy’s* audience of community practitioners, is the connection Ryder makes between scholarship and larger ideological, historical, and material realities faced by organizations, particularly in the forms of neoliberalism and nihilism.

In Chapter Three “Public Writing in Community Organizations,” Ryder examines the texts of community organizations and outlines some of the major rhetorical challenges they face as they navigate the conflicting needs and pressures of their “material, historical, and ideological contexts” (64). In order to form publics in these contexts, organizations use an array of rhetorical tools. One of the described tools is invoking agency through the

rhetorics of reconstitution; that is, organizations often encourages audience members to “identity with contemporary or historical-change agents” so that audience members realize their own potential for change and social action (73). Public organizations also enact rhetorics that emphasize the interdependence of audience members who must rely on each other to create change. Many organizations enact inclusive rhetorics and orient themselves toward strangers; others are exclusive about who belongs to its public. Last, public organizations contend with simultaneously locally and nationally rooted rhetorics.

As mentioned earlier, the book’s classroom applications are most fully developed in this third chapter, where Ryder spends the second half of the chapter outlining her pedagogical approaches to public writing and rhetoric courses. (Some logistical concerns are also discussed, though most of these details can also be found in the appendices.) When teaching undergraduates, “rather than impose the theories as an explicit framework in the course,” Ryder offers students the opportunity to uncover the rhetorical strategies at work in the community discourses and texts of partner organizations (such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph). This Friereian “problem-posing” approach betrays the complexity and varied range of public writing for students and also allows them to view “writers in community organizations as experts in public writing” (82).

Chapters Four, Five, and Six further theories of publics and counterpublics, as well as examine and problematize circulation. Chapter Four “the Public of Traditional Media: Circulating Deliberative Conversations” looks at the roles that circulation venues play in public formation. Sites of circulation are not neutral nor universally accessible, Ryder writes, and dominant media forces that “control the means of distribution can dictate the rhetorical form of any texts that they will forward, thus controlling what kind of public is invoked” (97). Here Ryder reviews Habermas’ public sphere theory and then analyzes the ways in which the rhetorics of this “idealized public sphere” and its deliberative exchanges are enacted and made into dominant ideals in traditional journalism.

Chapter four is complicated in Chapter Five “Counterpublics: Beyond Deliberative Conversation,” where Ryder examines counterpublics—groups that resist the idealized notions of neutrality and universality—as well as conventions for “proper” speech and behavior that are “embedded in the idealized public sphere and [that instead] invoke alternative ways for people to come together” (135). Counterpublics are complex but crucial to address in the classroom, Ryder contends, and so her “solution has been to allow discussions about counterpublic rhetorics to evolve from the experiences and observations that students make” (154). Then in Chapter Six “Circulating Counterpublic Rhetoric,” Ryder continues working with

counterpublics, asking how counterpublics “maneuver with and against traditional journalism” (165)? She examines four case studies to answer this question.

In Chapter Seven “Publics 2.0: Public Formation through Social Networking,” Ryder notes the similarities between scholarship on urban spaces and that which examines public formation on the Internet. In this chapter Ryder examines scholarship on the democratic possibilities of the Internet, much of which examines whether or not it can serve as an openly accessible forum for deliberative exchange that overcomes “the constraints on ‘real’ public exchange in traditional media” (203). Throughout this body of work, Ryder notes, there is an assumption that “the ideal space would promote serious and productive discussion across diverse groups about public issues” (204). The final move in Chapter Eight is to critically reflect on the location of the public writing course within the university (or universities, as Ryder argues). That is, what are the competing values and diverse roles of the university, and how do they affect a public writing course? The work of the university is public work, “part of the ongoing struggle to define public space and democratic ideals . . . [and so] we need to be mindful of both the consequences and the possibilities of our roles in teaching public writing” (271).

Ryder writes from the perspective of someone who works in rhetoric and composition and teaches first-year writing courses; thus the book may resonate most with that audience. Nonetheless, Ryder’s perspective can demonstrate the value of using the rhetorical modes of inquiry modeled in this book as well as the complexity brought to a service-learning course by studying organizations as text for a wider audience. As well, those from diverse fields who incorporate service-learning into their courses will find new ways of reflecting on community organization partnerships in this book and will also appreciate Ryder’s attention to praxis. As a graduate student, I appreciated how the book brought complex theories into conversation with rhetorical theories and critiques, history, ideologies, and Ryder’s problem-posing pedagogy. I also appreciated seeing the ways in which the public sphere is (problematically) alive and well in American culture since it is a theoretical model that I have seen so thoroughly critiqued.

In all, *Rhetorics for Community Action* probes the plural, conversant, and competing nature of public interactions, writing, and formation. Ryder’s argument for an expanded vision of the public in scholarship is what makes the book such a compelling and valuable contribution to our understanding of public writing and rhetoric. Otherwise,

we may dismiss or overlook the rhetorical moves that have solidified other groups around other kinds of values. Without such understanding, we are limited in our abilities to engage

with those publics in a spirit of inquiry and in our abilities to resist and challenge those publics whose visions we find incompatible with our own. (7)

What’s more, such engagement will trickle down to our teaching too. By looking at the ways in which many different types of community organizations work to invent a public through texts students “can start to develop a repertoire of rhetorical moves of public writing” (56) and understand that public writing is not just a matter of following a set of isolated, prescribed rules but rather a complex act of responding to a public rhetorical situation.

Thus the astute and wide-ranging theoretical work of this book demonstrates not only how important it is for us as scholars to understand theories of publics, but also how such an understanding vitally informs our classrooms. In our present moment—the era of the Occupy movement and conservative backlashes against recent measures like the universal single-payer healthcare system in the United States—I think that the work of this book and its potential for the classroom are more crucial than ever.