

Spring 2009

Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics, by Elenore Long

Erica Bronson
Eastern Washington University

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

Recommended Citation

Bronson, Erica. "Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics, by Elenore Long." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2009, pp. 121–24, doi:10.25148/clj.3.2.009473.

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.

Long, Elenore. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor P, 2008. ISBN: 1602350566. \$30.00.

*Reviewed by Erika Bronson
Eastern Washington University*

Elenore Long's *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics* introduces community literacy to newcomers and offers a provocative, data-driven theory of "how it is that ordinary people go public." As the sixth book in Charles Bazerman's *Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition Series*, Long's monograph offers a theory of local public rhetoric by offering a set of pivotal studies in community literacy through the local public framework. As the former director of Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center (CLC)—a partnership between the Community House on Pittsburgh's Northside and Carnegie Mellon University—Long expertly illustrates the power of the local public framework by defining the guiding metaphor that drives a given portrait of local public life, by describing the context and tenor of its discourse, and by dramatizing the inventive—often exuberant—literacies that people within a given local public bring to the exigencies at hand. The conclusion of the book offers a path forward for teachers and researchers in a variety of fields by illuminating pedagogical practices supporting community literacy and by including an extensive glossary and a thirty-eight-page annotated bibliography.

In the "Introduction and Overview," Long situates community literacy at the point where private lives and public institutions intersect. These "local publics" are at once rhetorical and material locales where ordinary people can make a difference through rhetorical agency. She also distinguishes community literacy studies from service learning and action research, two broader, related fields of scholarship. Community literacy marks a shift in scholarly focus from the academy and the professional world to the community and conceptions of democratic practice. This chapter overviews the rest of the text, outlining the research questions guiding each chapter, and acknowledging that the book does not address people going public in virtual discursive spaces—as much as the promise that the work holds for future scholarship.

The local public framework, a product of Long's in-depth synthesis of previous community literacy scholarship and her experience directing the CLC, is described in the second chapter, "Definitions and Distinctions." She uses the framework throughout the book as a heuristic for defining and comparing different methods that activist rhetoricians use to enter community conversations. The first point of comparison in the five-point framework is the "Guiding Metaphor," which provides an image of the discursive space and its distinguishing features. The second, the "Context," describes the location and the attributes of the given discursive space. The third, "Tenor of the Discourse," illuminates underlying affective qualities

of each local public, while the fourth, “Literacies,” refer to conventions that individuals use to realize their motivations for going public. Finally, the fifth point, “Rhetorical Invention,” accounts for the ways people transform literate practices to respond to often quite pressing social exigencies.

Chapter Three, “Locating Community Literacy Studies,” provides a rationale for Long’s five-point local public framework by arguing “that the history of community literacy is tied up in efforts to define the *local public* as an object of inquiry and a site for rhetorical invention” (25). After reviewing past scholarship and the goals and outcomes of various literacy projects, Long pulls together some of the most prominent features of situated-public literacies, positing that they tend to be performative, collaborative, and problem posing; further, they may have institutional sponsorship with differing results. She also explores the relationship between community literacy and democratic engagement, avoiding idealized notions and focusing on Nancy Fraser’s “call for the study of ‘actually existing democracy’” (41). In this vein, Long describes contemporary activist-educational initiatives and pedagogical practices that help students enter public discourse, ending with insights into creating partnerships between universities and communities.

Situated studies of literacy pose a conundrum for readers who want to generalize from them. Given the insights that temper claims of an autonomous model of literacy, how do situated studies of literacy contribute to knowledge building—beyond appreciation for highly contextualized accounts of literacy in action? The most significant contribution of Long’s book may be the alternative approach to knowledge building it models and sustains across each of the implications sections in chapters four through eight. Based on the insights that the local public framework affords readers, Long’s implications offer fine-grained, data driven commentary on some of the most vexing issues in community literacy, including the tenuous nature of democratic practice; the difficulty individuals, let alone groups, have connecting their private lives to public institutions, and the contested place of rhetorical *technai* in contemporary public life.

Further, Long uses chapters four through eight to delve into the five metaphors identified in her local public framework: “An Impromptu Theater: A Local Public That Turns Its Back on Formal Institutions;” “The Cultural Womb and the Garden: Local Publics That Depend on Institutions to Sponsor Them;” “The Link and the Gate: Local Publics That Intersect with Public Institutions;” “The Community-Organizing Effort and the Community Think Tank: Local Publics Forged in Partnership with Formal Institutions;” and “The Shadow System: A Local Public that Defies Formal Institutions.” In each chapter Long uses the five-point framework to flesh out the metaphor, citing modern literacy projects to support her observations. For example, literacy events from Shirley Brice Heath’s ethnography of 1970s Trackton, an African American neighborhood in the Piedmont Carolinas, illustrate the Impromptu Theater. In this model of literacy, children learned socially-appropriate communication methods through performances of “competitive verbal play [...that] prepared [them] to survive in a world that

adults knew to be unpredictable and unfair” (55), rather than in school. Long plays out the remaining metaphors by analyzing ethnographies of diverse community settings like Deborah Brandt’s study of the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church; Caroline Heller’s work with the Tenderloin Women’s Writing Workshop; David Barton and Mary Hamilton’s depictions of Springside, a working-class neighborhood in England, Ellen Cushman’s experiences in an industrial city she calls Quayville; Eli Goldblatt’s efforts to organize community leaders in North Philadelphia around a literacy initiative; Linda Flower’s collaborative work at a think tank in Pittsburgh, and Ralph Cintron’s study of street gangs.

In Chapter Nine, “Pedagogical Practices,” Long catalogues differing ways that students use literacy to take public action and lists institutional practices that support students’ efforts. The pedagogies are categorized as “Interpretive,” “Institutional,” “Tactical,” “Inquiry-driven,” or “Performative,” which Long relates back to the local public framework. This section of the book offers options for encouraging social awareness through classroom-community collaborations while honestly portraying the difficulties educators may encounter. This chapter not only provides a clear, user-friendly blueprint for students and teachers, but it also opens doors for more in-depth research by listing current rhetoric courses, research projects, and literacy programs employing each of the five pedagogies.

In the conclusion, Long beautifully sums up what community literacy programs ask of students: “to take risks, to build new kinds of working relationships, to venture into spaces they’ve never gone before, to tax their writing skills like nobody’s business, to think long and hard about the challenges and the possibility of social change, and to act” (198). Throughout the book, she documents various ways that students can achieve these goals as she carefully considers potential problems that may arise. Long clearly illuminates the many issues and triumphs in community literacy scholarship without trivializing, idealizing, or championing one approach over another. Instead, she advances previous studies by allowing space for differing interpretations of how to go public, in effect exemplifying through analysis, her past studies of the rival hypothesis stance with Linda Flower and Lorraine Higgins. Singular answers are usually short-sighted and simplistic, and Long’s treatment of community literacy is neither of these. Her monograph lays a clear path forward for graduate students, literacy workers, scholars, administrators, legislators, and others who see the value in and power of ordinary people going public.

