

Spring 2008

Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies in the Public Sphere

Elizabeth Campbell
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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

Recommended Citation

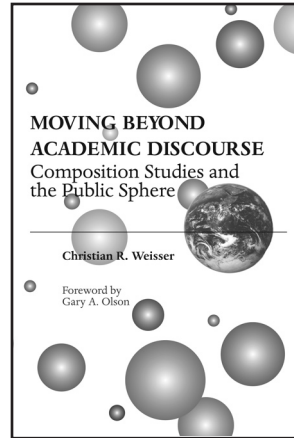
Campbell, Elizabeth. "Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies in the Public Sphere." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2008, pp. 153–56, doi:10.25148/clj.2.2.009498.

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.

■ ■ ■

Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies in the Public Sphere. Christian R. Weisser. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002. 168 pp. ISBN: 978-0809324163. \$29.50.

*Reviewed by Elizabeth Campbell
Ph.D. Candidate in Composition
and TESOL, Indiana University of
Pennsylvania*



In *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies in the Public Sphere*, Christian Weisser undertakes a theoretical and historical investigation of composition's increasingly public trajectory. Grounding this public turn in composition's disciplinary history and linking it to changing constructions of the public sphere across disciplines, Weisser offers a pedagogy of writing and writing instruction that recognizes and teaches the fundamentally multiple and political nature of public writing. Framing composition as a "democratic enterprise," Weisser builds a vision of public writing as "written discourse that attempts to engage an audience of local, regional, or national groups or individuals in order to bring about progressive societal change" (90). Public writing, in his view, should provide writing students with meaningful opportunities to affect real change through discursive practice; he thus urges all who work with students and writing to fully engage our many publics. By providing students with successful experiences of authentic civic engagement, we demonstrate and affirm the value of democratic participation.

Weisser grounds his study in a historical overview of composition studies; his aim is to demonstrate how today's more engaged and public writing pedagogies have evolved out of the discipline's shift in focus from teacher to student, from product to process, and from subject to act. Many contemporary sites of composition, he notes, are deeply concerned with views of the public (and "publics") and attempt, in a variety of ways, to situate writing in the public sphere. The reasons for and consequences of this re-situation are both specific and important; indeed, he writes, "[m]any current writing courses—and the theoretical and pedagogical discussion concerning them—attempt to prepare

students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming their political and social responsibilities as, and for lives as active participants in public life” (3).

The possibilities for active and equitable participation in public life drive this text. Noting the failure of early social constructionist approaches to either recognize or interrogate the ties between academic discourses and privileged social positions, Weisser locates the germ of today’s public writing in the political and pedagogical concerns of *radical educationists*. Drawing a straight line back to Paolo Freire’s early work and followers, Weisser asserts that the radical goal of resituating authority through dialogic practice provided the political impetus for today’s public turn. Exploring a number of different versions and sites of public writing, Weisser extends both encouragement and caution to those who take their classes public. To resituate authority does not necessarily mean to make it equitable. Like every other discursive practice, public writing cannot be divorced from issues of difference and power.

Weisser seeks to more adequately theorize the public sphere within which compositionists and students write. He is careful throughout to construct the public sphere as a discursive site in the conceptual, rather than material, sense. He works well against Jürgen Habermas’s foundational work in this area, which situated the public sphere in the discourses and discursive situations of seventeenth-nineteenth century—white, male, propertied—bourgeois society. Calling upon the work of Richard Sennett, Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, Nancy Fraser, and others, Weisser pushes the idea of the public sphere away from a general site of sameness and consensus toward multiple sites of difference and negotiation.

Per Fraser, Weisser points to many of the problems embedded in the Habermasian public sphere, not least of which is the assumption that the fact of its public-ness somehow makes the public sphere inherently more democratic and equitable. Again, the appearance of participation is not, of itself, participation. Refigured along these lines, the Habermasian public sphere is transformed into a range of vital and active public spheres, counterpublics, and strong publics that engage and compel both deliberation and action.

Weisser locates much of the promise for students and public writing in these counterpublics and strong publics. These are potentially fruitful discursive spaces where student writing might find and engage meaningful and receptive audiences. Acts of public writing that lead to action provide students with positive discursive experiences that compel them toward deeper civic engagement. In this view, the impulse behind public writing is connected to the desire for students to “produce meaningful discourse that has the potential to shape their lives and the lives of others” (91). The hope here is that if students have writing experiences that actually contribute to social change, those experiences will transform how they think about their future discursive and civic lives.

Having refigured the public sphere in terms of complexity and multiplicity, and public writing in terms of counterpublics and change, Weisser turns his attention to how writing and acting in the public sphere can reframe compositionists as *public intellectuals* who actively engage the push for

“progressive political and social change” (116). Challenging the notion that there can no longer be an effective public intellectual, he demonstrates that the problem is not with the concept of the public intellectual per se, but with Habermasian constructions of the public sphere that necessitate having to address—and hold the attention of—general or mass publics. Through Fraser, he suggests that it might be more useful for academics to reconstruct public intellectuals as engaging particular rather than mass audiences. Replacing “the public sphere” with “public spheres” sketches out an aesthetic of intellectual activism that makes use of the particularity of our time.

All of this leads—and leads back—to activism. Weisser’s work is shot through with the important idea that composition is never only instrumental. His most forceful argument is that compositionists are uniquely situated to work with students on the “real skills” they will need to fully participate across a range of academic, professional, and public spheres, skills that are grounded in deep understandings of the formal, expressive, social, and political power of discourse. Weisser urges compositionists to take advantage of this unique situation, to merge our words with our worlds, and to enlist ourselves and students in public acts of discourse that lead to (and result in) meaningful civic engagement.

For academically situated compositionists interested in taking their writing classes public, or for those in related fields who desire a deeper understanding of the current public turn in composition, *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse* is a useful and important book. The text gives historical and theoretical background that helps to contextualize the public turn in composition, background that also helps to contextualize the public turn’s many relatives—service learning, community literacy, and the engaged university, for example. Weisser’s thorough treatment of public writing will be especially helpful for graduate students in composition and communication studies who wish to formulate research and teaching agendas that explicitly engage a broad range of publics. It might also help those who work in the spaces between universities and communities—especially community workers with interests in the community-university writing projects—to contextualize the community work of their colleagues in the academy.

Weisser’s text also raises a number of questions that future researchers might fruitfully address. As always, there remains the question of how best to work constructively across a range of political agendas. Although many have tackled this issue, much more remains to be done. Additionally, Weisser gives several accounts of actual public writing projects, but more are necessary. Happily, *Community Literacy Journal* is beginning to fill that gap. And finally, future researchers might find value in further investigations of public writing’s roots. Weisser grounds public writing in the work of radical educationists, but it is also possible to place the public writing impulse within a much longer intellectual tradition. Both radical pedagogies and the discipline of composition seem to emerge out of the same historical moment; thus one could find the roots of both in the GI Bill, or Progressive Education, or the Morrill Act, or even in yet another examination of the (admittedly conditional)

shifting centers of power that defined the Enlightenment Project. I toss off these ideas in ways that gloss their complexity, but one of the strengths of this text is that it leads to these larger questions. *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse* reaches beyond its own pages, compelling us to think about public writing's thick links to other histories, theories, politics, publics, and practices and to act in ways that that affirm—for ourselves as well as students—the value of public work.

