Susan Wells

Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?

On February 24, 1991, Arthur Colbert, a Temple University criminal justice major, was stopped by two Philadelphia police officers as he looked for his date's address. They accused Colbert of running a crack house under the name “Hakim,” and took him to a deserted building. He was beaten; a gun was pointed at his head. Colbert spent the rest of the night at the 39th District Headquarters on Hunting Park Avenue, being questioned, slapped around, and threatened. They let him go in the morning, warning him to stay out of the area.

The next day, Colbert returned to the headquarters and filled out a “Citizen's Complaint” form. He wrote the story of his night, filling three sheets of paper, printing in capitals, and concluding, “The above events happened violently and brutally.... I am a Temple student and will be around that area quite frequently it seems as though the people who are supposed to be protecting my civil rights are the ones who are violating them. I can't say this for every police officer, but this is the case with these two cops” (Bowden and Fazlollah). The officer in charge was impressed: unlike other complaints against these policemen, Colbert's was “coherent and concise, loaded with details.” The subsequent investigation uncovered (eventually) a pattern of frameups, bribes, and abuses of power by the Philadelphia police; it led to charges, suspensions, transfers, and other reforms.

I was fascinated by this story in the September 10, 1995 Philadelphia Inquirer. As a citizen, I was angry; as a teacher, I was upset that a student had been brutalized. But as a writing teacher, I was triumphant. Colbert had probably learned to write strong narrative in our program; his complaint sounded like a successful basic writing assignment—good sequential order,

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lots of detail and elaboration, a clear, supportable conclusion. Someone had
done good work with this student. And his text had been efficacious: it had
turned around the whole police department, delivered innocent grand-
mothers from unjust imprisonment, and set aside scores of false convictions.

My triumph settled down with my next cup of coffee—Colbert’s com-
plaint had been the twenty-third filed against these cops, and the Rodney
King incident probably prompted the department’s investigation. But my
moment of exhilarated delusion speaks about the desire for efficacious
public writing, particularly as it is invested in students. It speaks of that de-
sire’s urgency: the response to Colbert’s writing seemed to rectify his terri-
fying experience. It speaks of that desire’s poverty: I once had stronger
hopes than helping my students write good complaints if they were beaten
up by the cops.

I want to investigate this desire, in its urgent poverty, more fully. If we
want more for our students than the ability to defend themselves in bu-
reaucratic settings, we are imagining them in a public role, imagining a
public space they could enter. I argue that we need to build, or take part in
building, such a public sphere; that the public sphere is always construct-
ed; and that it cannot, in our society, be unitary. These exigencies are not
limited to academic settings: any speaker must work to build a public. I
base my arguments on Jürgen Habermas’ treatment of the public sphere,
as modified by Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge, and illustrate them by ex-
amining President Bill Clinton’s construction of a public in his 1993 Health
Care Speech.

Rhetoricians and compositionists have turned toward the public, for the
best of reasons. But we have some problems locating the public—knowing
exactly where should we turn. In the Charles Kneupper Memorial Address
to the Rhetoric Society of America, Edward Schiappa argued that “the place
for cultural critique by teachers and scholars of rhetorical studies is not only
the classroom or academic books and journals, but also ‘in the streets’ and
other nonacademic public and private forums” (21). Schiappa rounds up the
usual suspects: letters to the student newspaper, or even the hometown
newspaper, speaking before city council or the state assembly. For Schiappa,
and for most of us, when we think about “public discourse,” the public ap-
ppears as a pre-existing forum where citizens make decisions face to face.
That space is so intensely imagined that we think it must be real—just a little
inaccessible, like live theater or downtown department stores.

But our encounters with even a local civic space—the place where we
decide a strike vote, hire a new minister, form a block watch—are discon-
tinuous and associated with crises. These scraps of discursive space are not
just pale descendants of the agora or the Enlightenment coffee house; they
are something else entirely. Public speech is a performance in time, located
at specific historical junctures, temporary and unstable, even though it is
imagined as a location in space, always available, with secure and discernable borders. We feel guilty for our absence from the public; we suspect that it has been usurped by political functionaries and spin doctors. As compositionists, we apply a deficit model to public discourse: it is one more thing students don’t know, one more thing we have trouble teaching (Smith; Farrell, Symposium). But public space is not available, at least not in the form we have imagined it.

It might be helpful to see the public and public speech as questions, rather than answers, and to consider how they are understood in contemporary cultural theory. The central theorist of the public is Jürgen Habermas, specifically in his The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Like so much of Habermas’ work, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere is both deeply problematic and astoundingly fruitful. Originally published in 1962, it was translated and reissued in 1989, and has provoked serious debate in the United States on both theoretical and historical grounds (Robbins, Calhoun). Scholars have criticized Habermas’ historical analysis (Ryan, Eley) and argued that he failed to understand domination (Aronowitz; for responses, see Habermas, “Concluding”; Wells). In Germany, the theory of the public sphere was criticized, extended and developed by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, whose The Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and the Proletarian Public Sphere is finally available in English twenty years after its original publication. Within rhetorical theory, Thomas Farrell’s Norms of Rhetorical Culture takes up Habermas’ analysis from an Aristotelian perspective, treating the public as a pre-existing audience, formed by a more or less developed rhetorical culture.

Habermas defines the public sphere as a discursive domain where private individuals, without the authority of state office, debate the general conduct of social and political business, holding official bodies accountable at the bar of reason. The public sphere promises equality of access and discussion governed by rationality, with no holds barred, no topics off limits. But it is not without its contradictions. We come to the public sphere with an orientation to reciprocal exchanges formed in a capitalist economy, and an orientation to subjectivity formed in the intimate world of the family. The public, like representative democracy, secularism, or experimental science, emerges as a richly determined practice that produces both knowledge and ignorance, both domination and a diffusion of power.

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere serves both as a historical reconstruction and as an aid to critical reflection. As a historical reconstruction, Structural Transformation considers the conditions for the possibility of democratic institutions; as an aid to critique, it contrasts actual decision making with the ideal of emancipated participation. Nor is Habermas’s a utopian account: the public, for him, has always implied exclusion.
and domination as well as openness and reason, since it assumed precisely the distinctions of wealth and property from which the concept of the private citizen is abstracted. For Habermas, the public is not a pre-existing site, a place to be entered by good citizens or seized by insurgents. Public discourse is not a kind of writing, or an ensemble of genres (letters to the editor, campaign leaflets, letter to congress). Public discourse is a complex array of discursive practices, including forms of writing, speech, and media performance, historically situated and contested. The public is not, as in some forms of Marxism, a reflex of productive relations, although public discourse does circulate as a commodity among others, even as it makes an exorbitant demand for dissemination outside the commodity system. Speakers and writers come to the public with a weight of personal and social experience; to speak in public is to render those experiences intelligible to any listener whatever, and therefore to compromise their private density. Finally, the public is not simply a neutral container for historical events: it has its own history, its own vexed construction, its own possibilities of growth and decay.

We do not do justice to this history, this set of possibilities, when we assign students generic public writing, such as an essay on gun control, or a letter to a nonexistent editor. In such assignments, students inscribe their positions in a vacuum: since there is no place within the culture where student writing on gun control is held to be of general interest, no matter how persuasive the student, or how intimate their acquaintance with guns, "public writing" in such a context means "writing for no audience at all." It is not some deficit on the part of students that makes such writing impossible. The space within which a new kind of public writing might be read, and therefore the incitement to read it, must be constructed, just as the culture of workingmen's colleges and ladies' physiological societies was constructed in the nineteenth century, just as MOO's and newsgroups are being constructed now. Such construction is difficult, and the teachers' role in it is contradictory. This essay frames those difficulties, and provisional attempts to resolve them, including such tactics as the Howard University "broad sympathy" pedagogy, which locates students within a public tradition of writing by Howard alumni, the many attempts at classroom magazines, including Randall Popken's practice of publishing a yearly research journal through Tarlton State University classes, and courses like Karyn Hollis' Writing for Social Change, which places student writers as interns in community organizations.

The difficulty of constructing a public is not an accident attached to our cloistered academic status. We are not uncertain in our treatment of public writing because we have been sheltered from a vibrant public sphere. Our public sphere is attenuated, fragmented, and colonized: so is everyone
else's. All speakers and writers who aspire to intervene in society face the task of constructing a responsive public. Nobody, not even the president speaking on national television, enters it without difficulty. Clinton's Health Care Address (September 22, 1993) was a remarkable example of how these and other difficulties operated on the most sanctioned of speakers, supported by all the media of publicity and the ethos of high public office.

The Clinton Health Care Plan was a major priority of his new administration. Clinton's speech explained to Congress and the television audience the provisions of the plan and argued for its central principle, universal coverage. But the passion of this speech was directed, not at health care reform, but at the debate that would make reform possible: "I want to say to all of you, I have been deeply moved by the spirit of this debate, by the openness of all people to new ideas, to argument and information" (1836). The desire to learn and the willingness to argue engage some of the deepest energies of this speech, and rightly so. A debate within some accountable public space was a precondition for any of the specific propositions about health care reform Clinton advocated. Clinton needed something like a Habermasian public sphere: a space that could sustain and adjudicate a debate on evidence.

But the health care debate could not be restricted to members of congress. Somehow, the "voices of the people" had to be included. And there is a venerable figure, in presidential rhetoric, for those voices—the representative citizen, an ordinary person whose experience demonstrates the policy-maker's point. We meet many such citizens in the Health Care Address—the small businessman with insurance problems, the nurse called from a patient's bedside to fill out forms. These figures have been investigated in the rich literature on presidential rhetoric in speech communication, where they are seen as attempts to simulate or create a public (Ryan; Medhurst; Bochin; Ritter and Henry; Weiler and Pearce; Jamieson, 1988, 1992). Here we read, for example, of the "hero in the balcony," a representative citizen who exemplifies public support for a policy. Ideally, the citizen is present at the speech, invited to stand for applause: the citizen can also be quoted, invoked, made present by a letter or artifact. Living or dead, the "representative citizen" has been a staple of presidential rhetoric since Reagan (Weiler and Pearce, "Ceremonial"; Carter; Blankenship and Muir; Ritter and Henry). Quoted or cited, such figures operate on multiple levels: within the authoritative discourse of the president, the audience sees and hears itself. Within the discourse of power, the figure of the ordinary citizen offers the audience identification with a name, town, and an occupation rather than a faceless "silent majority." Pictures of the representative citizen function as an inartistic proof of the proposition being advanced. Aristotle grudgingly conceded visual displays a place, alongside
oaths and confessions obtained by torture, in the arsenal of persuasion: on television such images are obligatory—the saintly Mother Hale, the diabolical Willy Horton (Jamieson, 1988, 90–118). Reagan raised the use of representative citizens to a minor presidential art form, introducing Clara Hale during his first State of the Union Address, reading a letter from the daughter of a veteran at the Point du Hoc dedication in Normandy, and commemorating individual soldiers—Lt. Trujillo from Grenada, Sgt. Benavidez from Viet Nam—during Congressional addresses. As Jamieson has demonstrated, the heroic individual can be a powerful metonym for a whole line of public policy, so that admiration for Trujillo or Benavidez implicates an audience in a specific and controversial foreign policy (Eloquence 157, 122). Representative citizens do not grow like mushrooms in the House balcony: they are invented, according to very precise specifications. After the Panama invasion, the Pentagon was directed to find a military hero who had saved lives rather than taking them; they searched long and hard before they found Trujillo (Ritter 106).

The representative citizen is a location, a “topic,” functioning as both as a heightened example of public virtues or vices, and also as a prop for identification. The representative citizen carries the quasi-sacred functions of savior or scapegoat—nobody questions Mother Hale’s virtue, or Willie Horton’s guilt—and is also a one of us, enjoying fifteen minutes of fame. In either role, the representative citizen displaces argument. The representative citizen is someone who is supposed to know, who has been delegated to understand, through intense experience, complex public issues. In the presence of such figures, it is impolite to discuss policy, since to oppose the Grenada invasion or voluntarism as a solution to drug abuse, or to support prison furlough programs, would be to affront those heroes and victims who look down from the balcony. To quote the representative citizen is to speak with a voice that imitates everyday talk, while precluding argument. The heroic citizen becomes the mouthpiece of monologic public policy discourse. Quoting the citizen suggests that any of us, talking through policy issues in terms of our own experience, will be more profound for being less professional.

In quotation, ordinary citizens seem to whisper in the corridors of power. The heroic citizen allows the political speaker to represent public policy as a conversation that anyone could enter. The professional discourse of public policy frames complex political and social issues as soluble problems, issues that can be resolved with the available evidence (Ohmann). Since public administration, like science and education, has become professionalized, opportunities for informed debate on central questions of policy have diminished (Habermas, Legitimation). Instead, simulacra of the public haunt presidential address.
Clinton used the small businessman Kerry Kennedy, whose insurance company wanted to drop his parents, to support a central argument of the speech. Kennedy’s dilemma demonstrated the need for far-reaching change in the health care delivery system. Reagan had used representative citizens to introduce deliberative materials into epideictic contexts, but Clinton’s exigencies were quite different. Since Clinton was proposing sustained political debate, he needed a more complex figure than Reagan’s citizen hero; rather than a ceremonial confirmation, he needed a representation of voice, of argument. These are not easy functions for the figure of the representative citizen: a monologic figure, capable of speech but not reply, stands uneasily for a dialogic situation. This contradiction, I would emphasize, was no mistake of Clinton’s: it bears the marks of difficulty and labor that distinguish all contemporary attempts to construct or approach a public.

Clinton drew the lesson from Kerry Kennedy’s experience: “This story speaks for millions of others, and from them we have learned a powerful truth. We have to preserve and strengthen what is right with the health care system, but we have got to fix what is wrong with it” (1838). This conclusion was at once tautological and controversial. No one would argue against preserving the good and reforming the bad, or propose that we change the good and keep the bad; Clinton invoked a maxim, a commonplace. Only in the context of an address to Congress on health care is such a proposition arguable: it shifts the debate’s burden of proof from the status quo, assuming instead the need for serious reform. (See Jacobs on declining public confidence in health care in Fall 1993.) Further, Clinton imagined—created, in the course of the speech—a discursive site where Kerry Kennedy, Congress, and the president could agree on reform. This configuration of the public sphere is strategic: since Congress had a long history of rejecting health care reforms, Clinton wanted to build an alternate space of political deliberation where the need for change in the health care system is assumed.

But, of course, this work of construction did not hold. In spite of Clinton’s palpable desire for a broad public debate, and the force with which he expressed it in the health care speech, we had no debate, no health care reform. Rhetorically, the Clinton administration entered a long period of feverish improvisation and mobile advocacy. We would not hear a call for debate again; and all possible readers of this essay will know better than I the outcome of Clinton’s improvisations. While the failure of health care reform was not primarily rhetorical, it suggests that figures like the representative citizen, adapted to spectacle and re-feudalized passivity, do not advance the labor of rationality that could sustain a contemporary public sphere.
And probably not a single public sphere, as Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge suggest in their *The Public Sphere and Experience*. Putting in motion the contradictions in Habermas' theory of the public, exploiting them to indicate openings, absences, and possibilities within contemporary public life, their public sphere is understood as contradictory to "proletarian experience." (The term is deliberately anachronistic.) The proletariat is characterized by negation, by opposition to the existing world, and by the need for reflection, for some practice of discourse that can make that negation explicit. Proletarian life is not a cohesive whole, and therefore cannot be expressed in the abstract rationality of the bourgeois public sphere, since within the public sphere, the class experiences of subaltern groups become private, commodified as interest group politics. At the same time, public institutions are shaped by a commonality of everyone's historical experience. Institutions like the university, representative democracy, and the press certainly perpetuate hierarchy, but they have also been shaped by cultural struggles, and preserve historical experiences that we may want to claim.

Abstaining from public life or public discourse severs our connections to those histories. For Negt and Kluge, no revolutionary paroxysm can resolve these contradictions: "If the masses try to fight a ruling class reinforced by the power of the public sphere, their struggle is hopeless; they are always simultaneously fighting against themselves, for the public sphere is constituted by them" (xlvii). The public sphere, however alien, cannot be simply opposed, but must be reconstructed and colonized. It will neither go away nor leave us alone.

Negt and Kluge's public is contradictory, overdetermined, insoluble and peremptory—and so it is very close to the experience of the classroom. As citizens, we cannot abstain from the public sphere or wish it away; we cannot fight it, although we can fight in it. The public sphere as it has crystallized and shattered in modernity does not represent, and cannot represent, the experience of subaltern classes; it does not even represent all the significant experience of ruling classes. It is a specific, historically textured, means of political representation; partial but not illusory. Our life in the classroom is marked by similar inevitability, partiality of representation, and historical contingency.

Whatever the limits of Negt and Kluge's analysis, with its Marxist vocabulary and its relentless politics, I know of no other theory that does justice to the simultaneous sense of exclusion and attraction that marks our relations to the public as students and teachers: our sense that the broadest political arenas of our society are closed to us, inhospitable; and also our impulse to enter them, or approximate them, or transform them. I have never known a writer, student or teacher, who wanted a smaller audience, or a narrower readership; I have never known a writer who felt
unproblematically at home in the discursive forms of broad political or social address.

Unlike Habermas, who sees the displacement of the classic public sphere by media as a "refeudalization" of public discourse, Negt and Kluge see the media as available for alternative publics and counter publics. Allusively, they suggest tactics for creating partial, temporary, and multiple public spheres. Negt and Kluge are less interested in critical diagnosis of the public sphere than in the efficacious production of alternatives (140): the reconstruction of public symbols and monuments, a diverse political press, associations of children, and the development of new forms of sensory experience. None of these theorists sees the public as a benign solution to marginalization or a debased domain of alienated doublespeak: the public is neither noble nor inherently oppressive. The cynicism that we encounter daily in our students and ourselves responds to a fragmented and contradictory public, a public that must be constructed and reconstructed, that requires multiple negotiations and positionings for every possible speaker. Cynicism, distrust of politics, even apathy, are neither moral failings nor signs of a romantic (or postmodern) political innocence; they are strategies for addressing a public that no longer supports the illusion of organic integrity.

Such fragmentation has rhetorical consequences. Clinton's choice of health care as the central issue for his first year was an attempt to finesse the fragmented public: all of us, after all, live in vulnerable bodies. But Clinton spoke, instead, of disembodied representative citizens, advocating the careful deployment of resources, an extension of technical expertise and government planning. Clinton argued that in a rational health care system, bodies will no longer be arbitrarily designated as "high risk," or as manifesting a "pre-existing condition": they will instead be abstracted to the rule of universal coverage. The body, like the abstracted citizen of the Enlightenment, achieves agency and efficacy at the cost of everything that had marked it as distinct, particular, individual, corporeal. But bodies are not simply generic containers for an undifferentiated human essence. They are complex, highly mediated, and culturally constituted locations, over which play every possible social division and conflict.

Again, it was not Clinton’s mistake that led to this aporia: such contradictions have characterized political discourse and rhetorical theory since the Enlightenment. Clinton’s invocations of the body and his utopian call to public debate are both inconsistent, just as our desires for our students are inconsistent, but they are necessarily and unavoidably so. Clinton attempted to manage or contain this aporia, and to construct a public that would not immediately fragment into constituencies or “communities” by displacing the motivation for reform from health to rationality, by relocating our desires from the body to debate. This strategy did not work: there was neither rationalization, containment, nor debate.

Our pedagogy of public discourse does not do much better. On the level of handbook advice, public discourse presents students with problems of abstraction: they must explain everything, assume an audience that knows nothing. Unlike the densely articulated lore that guides students through critical essays, research papers, and other academic genres, textbook advice on public writing is thin and soupy, as if the role were so improbable that no guidance could normalize it.

In *Fragments of Rationality*, composition theorist Lester Faigley convincingly argues for a reorientation to public discourse, a recovery of the emancipatory impulses of the early process movement (71). Faigley joins Halloran in calling for “recovering a lost tradition of rhetoric in public life,” noting that while college rhetoric in the eighteenth century was highly politicized and anything but safe, it also excluded women, minorities, and working people. Having replicated Habermas’ discussion of the contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere, Faigley proposes that we interrogate the structures of the classroom, opening up a new area of disciplinary investigation within it:

To challenge the lingering conception of the writer as ungendered, classless, and living outside of history, several scholars in composition have invited students to explore their situatedness as writers and the politics of literacy. These explorations are often aligned with a more general movement known as cultural studies. (72)

Faigley is proposing a valuable pedagogical practice, but not a practice of public discourse. Clinton called for debate on health care rather than for improved health care; Faigley advocates the analysis of literacy rather than public literate action. The desire for a public derails the activity that might construct one. Our choice is between the bad abstraction of a publicity which barely disguises privilege, and the concreteness of a self-reflexive practice directed at critique and self-consciousness rather than intervention or agency. Cultural studies has made invaluable contributions to political pedagogy, but it does not answer the question of how students can speak in their own skins to a broad audience, with some hope of effectiveness.
Given the intractable fragmentation of our own public sphere, it is likely that the representations of the public we offer students beyond the classroom will be provisional; we will look for alternate publics and counter publics. We might be guided by an image from Negt and Kluge's later work, *History and Self-Will*—the prison visiting room. The visiting room allows communication between inside and out. It represents the prisoner's participation in both worlds. The visitor's room is not a free space, let alone a safe house, but a space in which boundaries are put in play for both prisoner and guest (Jameson 72). Would it do too much violence to the utopian energies of our profession if we were to take the visiting room as an image of the discursive spaces we are seeking? Such a metaphor might help us make better use of such ingenious tactics as paired writing classes at different institutions, the collection of oral histories, the establishment of computer networked classes.

The image of the visiting room suggests that our work establishes a point of exchange between the private, the domain of production, and some approximations of the public sphere. It is not directed at the political opinions of students, however progressive or retrograde, but toward the production and reading of texts that move between the public (the political, the abstract, the discussable) and the private. Privacy includes, in our society, both the most intimate experiences of the family and also a railroad's plans for chemical spill containment system. The realignment of rhetorical pedagogy to the public I advocate is not, therefore, a prescription or proscription of a genre of writing. Personal essays are not intrinsically "private"; technical discourse is not necessarily "public." Rather, publicity is constructed as a relation of readers to writers, including notions of rationality and accountability that are continually open to contest.

And here, the image of the prison visiting room breaks down, since public discourse is not face-to-face conversation. Unlike conversation, public discourse cannot be regulated by attending to the responses of a partner. In the public, we encounter proposals rather than intentions, a search for common understanding rather than a desire for expression. The Enlightenment public sphere regulated itself by abstracting its participants to a norm that was male, adult, and propertied. A reconstructed public sphere cannot readopt those norms of abstraction—but it cannot model itself, either, on the deeply situated nuances that shape good talk. The public requires, instead, an understanding of what is assumed—and therefore available as a value—by all speakers and writers: of what is universal without being foundational. These discursive norms, Habermas argues, operate counterfactually—we invoke them only when they are not being met. They are universal, not because human nature is unchanging, but because relations of equality and reciprocity are implied when speakers and writers take up the work of persuasion. Nobody can argue that you ought to be persuaded
by force rather than reason, that a powerful speaker has the right to impose ideas on others, or that personal benefit should outweigh the interests of a group. We may be scandalized by Habermas' notion of communicative values, and of the subordination of particular interests in the public sphere, but there are good reasons to take these unfashionable ideas seriously. In many ways, we assent to these ideas whenever we undertake the labor of persuasion, a labor we undertake not because we think that society is transparent to rationality, but because we know that we will live with the outcome of socially constructed decisions. We do not want them to be determined by force or manipulation. As Habermas put it:

There seems to be in the minds of many of my interlocutors over the past years an alternative I've never quite understood: that when there are differences, we also have the choice of escaping these repressive procedures [of public discourse] and just going off in peace. That's not a meaningful alternative choice. There are problems that are inescapable and can only be solved in concert. Who, then, makes up the concert? ("Concluding Remarks" 467)

Public discursive forms share an orientation to action, including communicative action. They require a reconfiguration of the writer, and of agency, beyond the figure of the isolated modernist scribe (Brodkey). Communicative action is an attempt by speakers and writers to coordinate plans, to come to agreement, to "make up the concert." Agreement can be articulated in different dimensions: communicative action can be oriented to the objective world, or to interpersonal relationships, or to the subjectivities of speakers. Habermas' definition of communicative action does not require a warm bath of mutual understanding among parties, or even, for that matter, much in the way of mutual understanding or respect. It does not require shared styles of communication. All that is required is an agreement to undertake reciprocal action, based on shared problems and possible solutions. David Sebberson has recently demonstrated that such an orientation to action offers a new understanding of power within rhetorical theory, and therefore a renovation of the traditional rhetorical issues of praxis and phronesis.

Habermas' examination of communicative action also enables us to understand the intractable difficulty of contemporary public spheres. Public spaces are difficult spaces, and they become more difficult as they become more inclusive. I am reminded of a meeting in my neighborhood, about evenly divided between Caucasians and African Americans, to discuss crime. (Here again, we would deal with the police, but not by writing Citizen Complaints: we identified cops we could work with, offices that were receptive to our input, cracks in the organizational edifice where we could take root.) Since we had been meeting for a while, the subject of race did
come up. The gas station owner asked if the white people in the neighborhood just didn’t want to live near black people. We actually discussed that question for about ten minutes before everyone agreed that the problem of crime was not racial. (We were trying to become a public, but we were likely to fall back into polite conversation.) Since we were all frightened, tempers were short; since we were all frustrated, interruptions were common. Our visitor, a block captain from a neighborhood a half mile over, shook her head and said, “It’s so hard, just talking in this meeting. It’s the mind set.” This entirely justified complaint echoes in the literature of our field, in the rich accounts of how the “mind set” of the academy is alien to women, working class students, and minorities. (For examples, see Stockton, Dixon, Brodkey.)

Rhetorics associated with identity politics would prescribe that we resolve that difficulty by searching long and hard for ways of talking that would make things less difficult. Such a reconfiguration of ways of speaking is certainly humane and necessary. But a rhetoric oriented to public discourse might begin by valuing what is difficult, and direct itself to the connection between discourse and action, rather than to the connections among speakers. What was keeping us at the block meeting, after all, was not affection, but our common desire for security. We do not need abstract norms for speech or action, or any essentialist criterion of rationality external to the issues posed by particular discursive situations. Rather, we need to make explicit the forms of agreement, the criteria of interdependence, that support particular communicative situations. These criteria will be formal and universal in their force: the criteria that force not be used to constrain agreement, for example, or that all affected parties speak to a matter being decided, or that decisions be reconsidered when new information emerges. Our problems require that we make up a very broad concert: they will not yield to more politeness rules. We need instead criteria for an agreement that can be sustained through difficulty, that will last out the inevitable day when reliable speakers hold contradictory positions, for good and honest reasons, and decisions must be made. Such formal criteria have critical force and can be used to open broader participation, a fuller resolution of conflicts, and a livelier appreciation of both difficulty and rhetorical skill. Habermas’ theory of communicative action can support discussion in various public spheres without requiring an impossible fullness of discourse, that, in its unapproachability, stabilizes the status quo. Nancy Fraser invokes such impossible fullness in her critique of Habermas:

Participation means being able to speak in one’s own voice, and thereby simultaneously to construct and express one’s cultural identity through idiom and style. (“Rethinking” 126)
I could not find such a cultural identity for myself, least of all in idiom and style. I am sure that I live in this culture, but I don’t seem to be able to do it in a single identifiable way. And so I would hesitate to send students on a search for their identities, a unitary cultural identity is itself an object of labor and struggle. Still less could I identify my “own voice.” Fraser expresses the desire for an efficacious speech that mediates subjectivity and the social without labor, the desire for a public sphere where speech and writing would not be difficult. This critique of Habermas relies upon the ideas of a unitary subject and a transparently expressive language that she effectively dismantles elsewhere, in Unruly Practices. If our publics will not resonate to such sublimely full voices, what will be read and heard in their stead? As rhetoricians and compositionists, we know that the public will need many kinds of writing—engineering proposals, nurses’ notes, memorial poems. Any of these texts can be articulated with the concerns of readers; any could become public writing. But public writing in a composition course, understood as a relation between readers, texts, and actions, can be organized in at least four ways.

First, the classroom itself can be seen as a version of the public sphere: as a model of the public, or a concentrated version of the public. Teachers and students see how classroom rhetorical strategies effect individual projects of persuasion and how they open or foreclose possibilities for common work. The issues of such a class might include connection to an audience, positioning, collaboration, and the articulation of texts in time. A classroom that saw itself as a version of the public might value such skills as focusing discussion, organizing work, tolerating and enjoying difficulty, and renunciation of safety and comfort. Such a classroom would develop and extend the pedagogical innovations of cultural studies (Giroux).

As I argued earlier in this essay, the main weakness of such an approach as a way of learning public writing is that the writing classroom has no public exigency: the writing classroom does important cultural work for the million and a half students it serves each year, but it does not carry out that work through the texts it produces. However, the experience of critical teaching in cultural studies (see, for instance, the essays in Fitts and France) suggests when students have come to understand their culture critically, the class’s exigency shifts. If the work of the class is reading culture, and if cultural appropriation is, as Habermas suggests, one of the first forms of the public, then the exigency of the cultural studies class—and by extension, the literature class—is potentially public.

A second strategy for teaching public writing would begin with the analysis of public discourse, including the texts produced in alternative and counter publics. Analytic genres would include not only the critical essay but also the genres of the contact zone: parody, dialogue, unedifying
comparison. Skills for teachers and students to cultivate would include an orientation to performance rather than disclosure, and a broadened appreciation of performance inside and outside of texts; such a classroom would search for forms of effective public advocacy that are not immediately reducible to brutal rhetorical advantage (Kennedy). Such a strategy locates the composition class within the powerful traditions of rhetorical study; it also mortgages composition to the analytic bias of such study, rather than encouraging the production of alternatives.

A third strategy might be to produce student writing that will enter some form of public space. Programs in literacy instruction have explored this terrain, opening to reflection students’ experiences writing for others, and watching others write (Minter et al.). Such teaching is firmly located in the social, and moves from a study of what students already know, as apprentices of the academy, to reflection about how that knowledge can be transformed. The real presses on such teaching in many ways: any internship program will face the thorny issues of placing students in political organizations, in advocacy groups that may seem transgressive to the academy, or as writers for controversial public figures. And this strategy necessarily confronts the problem of relentless ideological reproduction: direct experience of the social can be a very convincing argument for the impossibility of change. None of these problems, of course, is itself a reason to foreswear such a teaching strategy.

A fourth possible strategy for teaching public writing is to work with the discourses of the disciplines as they intervene in the public. Habermas uses the notion of differentiation to analyze the disjunctions among mature disciplines, the professions in which they organize knowledges, and the complex public issues that face modern societies: the fate of Clinton’s health care plan demonstrates the social cost of differentiation. Differentiation and modernization are not reversible processes: complex issues can be opened to public discussions through a translation or opening of technical specificity, but not by deskilling the professions or evading their expertise.

Particularly in advanced writing classes, students come to composition with an initial socialization in professional forms. We might use that socialization to teach about public writing very concretely in partnership with students from diverse disciplines. A class that included students from political science, sociology, pre-medical fields, actuarial science, planning, and risk management could powerfully address a public issue like health care, an issue that engages each of their disciplines.

Such a class could analyze how, if at all, their discipline speaks to a broader public: what happens at legislative hearings, or in negotiations with granting agencies or regulatory bodies? The class could work collabo-
ratively to produce documents that approximate disciplinary knowledge, but are oriented to broader audiences, and begin to think about how such audiences could be organized. This strategy would take up directly the possibilities and the problems of the university's location in relation to the public and the professions: it would also, at many universities, require serious and sustained organizational work.

These four strategies are schematic and provisional; they are intended to suggest classes or assignments, to help frame a discussion on public writing. All of these strategies assume our continued attention to the writing our students produce, writing that is likely to take on less and less familiar forms as we reconstruct the public. Some of out students' most useful writing might remind us of a 'zine; some might sound like a church bulletin. My guess, though, is that it won't sound much like E. B. White.

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Notes


2. This work has not yet appeared in English. My account of the metaphor of the prison visiting room comes from Miriam Hansen's review of Negt and Kluge in "Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres" (Public Culture, 1993).

Works Cited


Fraser, Nancy. “Rethinking the Public Sphere.” *Calhoun* 109–42.


