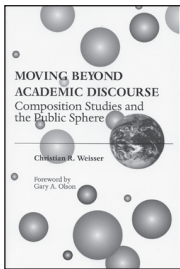


**Moving beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere**

by Christian R. Weisser. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002. 145 pp.

**Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition**

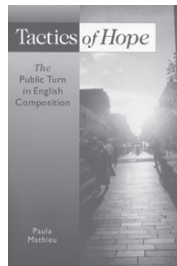
by Paula Mathieu. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 2005. 150 pp.



As Gary Olson relates in the foreword to Christian Weisser's *Moving beyond Academic Discourse*, over the past decade "the field of public writing is clearly emerging as a powerful

expression of some of the field's most cherished values. Too often, composition pedagogies have been thoroughly arhetorical, directing students to write to no one for no apparent purpose ("Write a three-page paper on abortion"). The move toward public writing is an effort to reinstate rhetoric as the heart of effective composition pedagogy" (ix). Olson's foreword is a valid assessment of current trends in composition studies, and he effectively sums up part of the motivation behind both

Weisser's monograph and Paula Mathieu's wonderful *Tactics of Hope*. Both authors draw from similar theoretical groundings and see the move toward



public writing as a rhetorically rich and empowering trend in composition studies. What differs between the authors, however, are the degrees of specificity and realism, and the examples of pedagogical application that they showcase

in their texts. While Weisser offers an extensive exploration of the theoretical bases that support public writing initiatives, sprinkled with some concise examples of pragmatic teaching practice, Mathieu offers an insightful, pragmatic, and sobering look at what happens when instructors and students undertake public writing, service-learning, and civic engagement projects in English classrooms.

Weisser's work with Sidney Dobrin in theorizing and explaining "ecocomposition" has been instructive and crucial toward understanding what people mean when they use the term (in particular, in the texts *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches*, as

coeditor, and *Natural Discourse: Toward EcoComposition*, as coauthor), and his *Moving beyond Academic Discourse* offers a similar theme of how college composition courses should focus on local contexts and the social parameters of all discourse. Employing the usual theorist suspects such as Jürgen Habermas, Paulo Freire, Nancy Fraser, Richard Rorty, et al., Weisser takes up the banner of public intellectualism, arguing that students becoming involved in and offering their own distinct political voices within local communities is a “call-to-arms” not only for him but also for other instructors in the field (132). Weisser implores instructors to make connections between the classroom and the communities in which we live, whether those are defined as neighborhoods, specific cities, or metro areas: “We should encourage students to write for publics where their discourse can have real import, and we should help them to develop the rhetorical skills they will need to sway opinion and bring about change” (111). While this call to make students’ writing activities count for more in the so-called real world and decrease what people refer to as the “empty assignment syndrome” is valid and empowering, Weisser doesn’t provide enough pragmatic advice about how exactly we can do this.

The abundance of theory building in *Moving beyond Academic Discourse* comes at the great expense of practical application. Weisser does offer some examples of how his students have moved beyond academic discourse, but that’s little help to instructors who seek pedagogical strategies and techniques that will translate readily to classrooms and their respective communities. In

addition, the text’s first chapter, “The Growth of a Discipline: Student-Centered Approaches to Writing Instruction,” provides a taxonomical history of composition studies that could be seriously called into question because Weisser presents a linear history that has eventually progressed to the conception of “radical composition” undergirded by poststructuralism, feminist theory, and the “Freireistas.” Although he offers some connections to other important theorists and pedagogical camps, the implication of *Moving beyond Academic Discourse* is that “post-process” composition instructors are the enlightened, while others might be the flotsam and jetsam of composition pedagogy. His analysis of the history and development of composition studies and how “radical approaches” to composition now represent current and sound pedagogy is open to a great deal of counterargumentation and debate, to say the least. It’s entirely plausible that many composition instructors would agree with Weisser’s injunction that they need to undertake “important theoretical and pedagogical advancements toward a more holistic and sophisticated approach to public writing” (87), but his work offers few new, tangible ideas from which instructors can construct a composition course devoted to public writing.

While *Moving beyond Academic Discourse* focuses mainly on the important theoretical dimensions of public writing, Mathieu’s *Tactics of Hope* offers a balanced and realistic critique of the “public turn” in composition studies, which she supports through copious examples of public writing or applied rhetoric. Mathieu’s grounding in regard

to civic engagement is similar to Weisser's, but her monograph offers one of the most stimulating perspectives available on what happens when composition instructors and students go out into what she terms the "street," defined as "a specific neighborhood, community center, or local nonprofit organization" (xii). Based on her extensive background with service-learning projects, community activism, and street papers (community-based, activist publishing, as exemplified by her detailed discussions of projects associated with StreetWise in Chicago, Spare Change News in Boston, Real Change News in Seattle, and the "Not Your Mama's Bus Tour" in Chicago), she presents an insider's view of what happens when instructors and students come in contact with the "public sphere." Additionally, she situates her critique in light of the fact that many chancellors, presidents, and deans are increasingly mandating that colleges and universities "do service-learning" more for public relations in "an increasingly competitive academic marketplace" than for the institutional mission of teaching or the altruistic aim of helping communities (12).

Because of her insider's perspective from experiences with nonprofit organizations and community-based projects, Mathieu provides composition instructors with a well-needed lesson in audience awareness when thinking about service-learning initiatives and public writing. She argues, refreshingly, that the "top-down" management of community outreach and service-learning by universities aligned with the national organization Campus Compact posits a mindset that perceives the pub-

lic realm "out there" as merely a place for research, opportunities for students to put in their time, and partnerships that mainly benefit universities and not communities. Drawing from Michel de Certeau's metaphor of how strategies emanate from a corporate-friendly, administrative approach that values institutional efficiency (credit hours, volunteer hours, case study opportunities) over actually acting rhetorically in the communities students and instructors come into contact with, Mathieu wants to have instructors conceptualize work in the "public realm" as tactical. She underscores the fact that students and instructors don't or shouldn't try to control the spaces they volunteer in—rather she claims that "once one's teaching directly intersects with the lives of people who are not part of the teaching institution, a strategic desire for stable excellence must be replaced with a tactical desire for hopeful innovation," so that a course that connects to a community or organization must "plac[e] innovation and movement at the center of the course, with a goal to creating something genuinely different each time. Newness isn't a goal in itself—it provides a means of ongoing inquiry, allowing the teaching to maintain a hopeful and humble orientation to the future and to the current world" (80). In essence, her argument calls for service-learning and civic engagement initiatives to reflect the ancient rhetorical concept of *kairos*, rhetorical action that is responsive to the intricacies of a certain time and place, not programs mainly focused on churning out consistent volunteer opportunities with service-learning partners.

Regardless of whether one agrees with Mathieu's argument against rigidly institutionalized service-learning and volunteerism, she is savvy in making composition instructors question how "[m]uch scholarship related to service learning equates institutionalization with success," an assumption still prevalent in many articles and conference papers even during this second wave of scholarship about service-learning (96). The fourth chapter of *Tactics of Hope*, in particular Mathieu's detailed and realistic examples of "The Promise and Perils of Institutionalized Service Learning" and her "Case for Local, Tactical Community Projects," should be required reading for any instructor who teaches or plans to teach a service-learning class. Along with Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters's *Writing the Community*, Thomas Deans's *Writing Partnerships*, and Derek Owens's *Composition and Sustainability*, Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* is an essential addition to scholarship devoted to service-learning composition, civic engagement initiatives, and community-focused writing.

reviewed by Tim N. Taylor  
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**Teaching and Evaluating Writing in the Age of Computers and High-Stakes Testing**

by Carl Whithaus. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005. 169 pp.

In *Teaching and Evaluating Writing in the Age of Computers and High-Stakes Testing*, Carl Whithaus takes on a slew of

TEACHING  
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Carl Whithaus

pressing questions, pressing both because they are urgent and because they push the boundaries of our comfort and knowledge as instructors and evaluators of composition.

He leads us through lively and informed inquiries into the problems and possibilities for contemporary (and near-future) writing instruction of: high-stakes testing, standards, accountability, critical pedagogy, computerized evaluation, democratized evaluation, hip-hop, punk rock, No Child Left Behind, multimedia literacies, string theory, electronic portfolios, and rhetorical context as a prime consideration in the teaching, composing, and evaluation of writing. In fact, the author probes so many interesting nooks of college-level writing instruction and assessment that this reviewer sometimes found it difficult to stay on the track of the author's argument or to know where I was in the line of inquiry. Nevertheless, as a teacher of writing with a special interest in how writing assessment can support or undermine best teaching practices, I found the book useful, insightful, challenging, and encouraging in a variety of ways.

In the preceding paragraph I listed a quick sampling of the topics Whithaus tackles in the book. One of the strengths of the book is that the author roots these myriad philosophical and pedagogical issues in numerous real, live, specific, right-here-on-the-page examples of student compositions, instructor's responses, assignments, and other relevant texts. Grounding his explorations in close readings of these specific examples

puts flesh on the bones of the theoretical discussions of cyber-rhetoric and Web literacy. As Whithaus himself observes when examining the shift from composing-for-the-page to composing-for-the-screen,

Understanding this shift in the abstract is one thing; examining its intimate dimensions through sample work, however, drives home the distinctions in new ways. (132)

To Whithaus's credit, he is consistently generous in presenting samples of student compositions as well as his own assignment sheets and responses to students' writing as a way to productively "examine the intimate dimensions" of the questions on which he focuses his book. As a result, readers who want to engage these manifold issues with a close eye on their impact on actual students, instructors, and classrooms will be rewarded.

As a person who believes firmly in the value of diplomacy, decorum, and evenhandedness, I was nevertheless sometimes alarmed at the extent to which Whithaus politely accepts the legitimacy of what many writing assessment specialists consider destructive assessment practices (e.g., timed impromptu essay exams like the SAT-W and computerized evaluations of students' writing). Strangely, Whithaus seems comfortable accepting such approaches to assessing paper-based writing and evaluation even while he offers sometimes blistering critical analyses like this one:

If all anyone wants students to do is to sit down and in 25 minutes write a grammatically correct

essay where they make a claim and support it with two or three examples, followed by a summation, then current [computerized evaluation] software and the W-component of the new SAT will drive the curriculums perfectly. (128)

I kept asking myself how Whithaus could reconcile his apparently well-informed and critical understanding of how assessment affects the teaching and learning of composition with his apparent "What, me worry?" attitude toward questionable assessment systems. What I eventually concluded was that this evenhandedness and open-mindedness serve a strategic function. Whithaus may, intentionally or not, have granted the legitimacy of contemporary corporate writing assessment approaches (such as SAT-W or a variety of computerized evaluation software packages) so he can then turn around and say: even if these approaches are adequate to traditional, paper-based rhetorical performances, they can't possibly provide the "situated," "distributive," and "interactive" evaluations that multimedia rhetorical efforts require. For the record, I firmly believe that these mass-marketed assessment tools are just as harmful to paper-based writing and instruction as they are to Web-based writing and instruction. That said, I accept Whithaus's argument that they are more obviously inappropriate in the multimedia literacies that he (correctly, I believe) predicts will soon overtake our field.

While this book provides a satisfactory introduction to a range of important writing assessment issues, where Whithaus shines brightest is in his treat-

ment of computer technologies—chiefly the Web—and their effects on and implications for the teaching of writing. With pedagogical boldness and ingenuity, he deals with Web-based composing, visual rhetoric, the use of music and video in teaching composition, blogs, and computerized tools for composing and evaluating text. Both as a researcher-theorist and as a teacher-scholar, the author impresses with his

courage to look critically at his own practices and with his tech-savvy innovations as a teacher of writing, all laid out in the pages of the book with screen shots and other illustrations to help readers understand and benefit from his analyses and insights.

reviewed by Bob Broad  
Illinois State University  
Normal, Illinois

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## HELP SHAPE NCTE POSITIONS BY SUBMITTING A RESOLUTION

If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching, or positions you would like to support, and you think NCTE should take a stand, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE's Annual Convention. If passed at the Annual Business Meeting for the Board of Directors and Other Members of the Council, proposed resolutions become part of the Council's position/philosophy on questions related to the teaching of English and can assist the Council in developing action programs.

For further details on submitting a resolution, or to see resolutions already passed by Council members, visit the NCTE Web site or contact Lori Bianchini at NCTE Headquarters (800-369-6283, ext. 3644; [lbianchini@ncte.org](mailto:lbianchini@ncte.org)). Resolutions must be postmarked by October 15, 2006.

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## CENTENNIAL IDEAS NEEDED

The National Council of Teachers of English will mark its 100th anniversary in 2011. The Task Force on Council History and 2011 is working to plan events for this watershed year, and we need input from all interested NCTE members. What would you like to see highlighted (and in what format) during the Centennial year? Any ideas for publications, books, products, or convention events will be appreciated. Send your ideas to Leila Christenbury, Chair, Task Force on Council History and 2011, P.O. Box 842020, School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2020; e-mail: [lchriste@vcu.edu](mailto:lchriste@vcu.edu).