Community Intellectuals
Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition by Thomas Deans; Literacy and Democracy: Teacher Research and Composition Studies in Pursuit of Habitable Spaces by Cathy Fleischer; David Schaafsma: Moving beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere by Christian Weisser
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**Review:** Community Intellectuals

**Frank Farmer**


For many in our profession, recent discussions about the available roles and responsibilities of the public intellectual have generated a number of lively debates, and perhaps more significantly, a number of difficult and provocative questions. Foremost among these, I believe, is the obvious, but nonetheless daunting, challenge of agreeing on what we mean by the term. To begin with: Is there truly such a figure as the public intellectual, and, if so, what does a public intellectual *do* that other intellectuals do not? How can we define—perhaps more accurately, redefine—the public intellectual to meet our needs and purposes in our moment? (And, more problematic, I think: Who exactly constitutes membership in the pronouns of my question?) Further, how might public intellectuals be distinguished from their nearest kin—scholars and academics, for example? In a time, moreover, when the notion of a viable public sphere is considered a distant norm at best, and a manufactured illusion at worst, can the public intellectual be anything other than a figure existing nowhere but in our imaginations? And to complicate matters even further, do we have a name for the sort of public intellectual who studies, well, other public intellectuals?

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In response to this last question, yes, we do, and that name is Richard Posner. In his recent *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, the famous jurist puts forth an argument that goes something like this: Our generation of public intellectuals performs its duties in a slapdash, interested, and typically uninformed manner. In a media environment in which discernment is in rare supply, our current public is assaulted with poor reasoning, hasty analysis, unfounded conclusions and predictions—all such failings apparent where we should least expect them, that is, in the discourse of our public intellectuals. Why? In part, claims Posner, because the market for public intellectuals is so fundamentally different from, say, the market for scholars and academics. The latter, at least, have the benefit of longstanding canons for what counts as good argument, reliable evidence, acceptable scholarship, and so on. Public intellectuals, on the other hand, respond to what the media reward. And what the media reward has little to do with quality intellectual work and a great deal to do with fame and celebrity.

Encountering such criticism of public intellectuals, readers will likely be surprised to discover that the centerpiece of Posner’s work is an empirical study of who exactly gains admission to the club, who gets to be called a public intellectual. Providing his readers with yet one more exercise in regrettable list making, Posner conjures what seems to be an exhaustive taxonomy of 546 public intellectuals, out of which he ultimately picks the top 100—the “Magnum P.I.s,” if you like—by tallying references in media outlets, Web and scholarly publications, and so on. Posner himself checks in at a modestly flattering number 70.

Reviewers of Posner’s book have noted its numerous methodological weaknesses; its conservative, ideological agenda (an agenda not especially well-camouflaged by pseudoscientific data); its remarkably laconic, more or less shrugging conclusions, and so on. I won’t rehearse these criticisms any more than I need to, except to observe that Posner and his critics share at least this much: an apparent inability to imagine public intellectuals as something other than academics with an identity crisis, as wayward members of the professorate who, after serving apprenticeships in their disciplinary fields, parlay their acquired expertise into the Elysian fields of public advice, debate, and prediction.

I am among those who think the phrase *public intellectual* somehow misses the mark, who think the phrase redundant if only because the latter of the paired terms, *intellectual*, has always resonated with the distinct tones of public engagement. However, I am not so interested in charting out differences among public intellectuals, academics, and scholars as I am in suggesting that it is the first term that needs our attention. To be more precise: Do there exist alternate conceptions of the public that are not included in our present discussions, and if so, how do such alternate conceptions change our present understandings of intellectual work? Are there conceptions that go beyond our rather impoverished understanding of the public as an
area where debates occur among celebrity intellectuals who display their argumen-
tative prowess to no apparent end? Is there a public that surpasses the one we imme-
diately assume when we hear the phrase public intellectual, a public that is both larger
in meaning but more local in scope?

A few years ago in this journal Ellen Cushman made the case for just such an
understanding of the public intellectual. Cushman argued that the received mean-
ings of “public” all derive essentially from a narrow focus on efforts to influence the
decision-making caste of “middle and upper class policy makers, administrators, and
professionals” (328). Instead of directing our efforts to these constituencies, Cushman
maintained, we need to broaden the meaning of public intellectual to include the
work routinely performed in our neighborhoods and communities, the varied intel-
lectual contributions of teachers and students, researchers and informed citizens,
and (by extension) volunteers, literacy workers, community activists—the sorts of
people who, it’s safe to say, will not show up on anybody’s list of public intellectuals.
Despite Cushman’s eloquent call for a more encompassing definition of the public
intellectual, little seems to have changed in our understanding of the term. Posner,
his critics, and most all who write about public intellectuals seem to agree with the
narrow definition that Cushman rejects. Perhaps, then, it is time we change our
terminology—or at least offer an additional term for the kind of public intellectual
some of us would like to see.

All of the books in this review not only exemplify the best of what Cushman has
in mind, but also invite us to consider whether community intellectuals might better
capture the kind of activities described in their individual emphases. Making this
move, doubling our available terms, would remind us that there are other publics
and other intellectuals whose efforts, while often unheralded, make an authentic dif-
ference in the lives of our neighbors.

Certainly, one of the more promising developments along these lines is the
increased interest in service-learning programs and courses. While this interest has
been manifest in composition studies for some time—in our journals and confer-
ences, in our teaching as well as our conversations about teaching—we have not yet
had a definitive statement about service-learning in composition: its history and
theoretical sources, its specific importance to writing instruction, its often precari-
ous location in the multiple contexts of the institution, the community, and the
literature of our discipline. Thomas Deans, however, has sought to address this need
and give us exactly the sort of timely, informed, and comprehensive look at service-
learning we need.

In his Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition, Deans offers his
readers a work of remarkable breadth, a work capturing within its pages a sampling
of familiar genres through which service-learning can be variously understood. Writing
Partnerships is at once, then, a sustained and developed argument, a critical and
scholarly exposition, a literature review, a pedagogical essay, an instructor’s manual, a resource guide, and a repository of course materials. That Deans is able to orchestrate all of these genres with such admirable clarity and coherence makes Writing Partnerships a uniquely valuable book—not only for current practitioners, but also for those teachers who would like to incorporate service-learning into their composition courses, yet aren’t quite sure how to do so.

After providing a definition of service-learning that underscores, in particular, how service-learning is distinct from volunteerism, community service, internships, and field placement (2), Deans proceeds to contextualize service-learning with the domain of English studies, noting its affinities with such cross-curricular programs as Writing Across the Curriculum and its promotion of teaching values widely shared by compositionists: “student-centered learning, collaborative inquiry, critical reflection,” and so on (6). Deans also identifies and elaborates service-learning’s theoretical sources in both John Dewey’s pragmatic experimentalism and Paulo Freire’s critical praxis. Acknowledging the important differences between the two, Deans focuses on those aspects of their works that possess special importance to service-learning. This theoretical discussion serves as an anchor to the substantive discussion that follows: a detailed explanation of three approaches to service-learning in composition.

Deans introduces us to the centerpiece of his work, a survey of how to conceive service-learning writing courses according to three prepositional understandings: writing for the community, writing about the community, and writing with the community. In a separate chapter for each, Deans shows how these various approaches imply different pedagogical values, strategies, and problems. Thus, students enrolled in a writing for the community project might help a local agency compose the sorts of documents intended to effect some organizational or community purpose and, in so doing, have the opportunity to experience “authentic rhetorical contexts for writing” (54). In projects that involve writing about the community, students perform community service and then reflect on their service, usually in the context of assigned course materials. A third approach, writing with the community, involves students in direct social action for the purpose of bringing to public discussion issues of neighborhood or community concern. In this approach, students are likely to produce hybrid discourses, writings emerging out of inquiry—projects that effectively blend course readings, secondary research, primary observational data, and more, and, at the same time, give representation to vernacular and community voices.

For each of these three chapters, Deans provides an individual service-learning course or project to illustrate, in depth, how each approach appears in the actual teaching performed by three colleagues. In the process of detailing these examples, Deans rather subtly manages to accomplish one of his announced purposes: to contextualize service-learning within the larger literatures of rhetoric, composition
studies, and critical theory, providing readers with a very rich, very full understand-
ing of service-learning in actual practice.

Deans concludes with reflections upon his threefold writing typology, and sug-
egests that its most important function may be as a heuristic in that it forces teachers
to ask, “What do we want our writing courses to do? What kind of literacies do we
most value in our curricula? What kind of writer do we hope to encourage through our
teaching?” (144). Noting that some teachers will want to combine these different
approaches, Deans offers a recent syllabus of his own as an illustration of how that
might be done, and then concludes by drawing our attention to the varied institu-
tional contexts in which his and other service-learning courses appear.

At this juncture, some readers might wish for an examination of the relation-
ship between certain forms of community-based research and service-learning
coursework—a discussion of how, for example, participatory action research (PAR)
or a “scholarship of engagement” might enable faculty to blend their research agen-
das with their service-learning classes. Such a discussion might show how activist
research can complement service-learning pedagogies in ways that enhance both
while, at the same time, help to legitimate service-learning in certain kinds of insti-
tutions. These are possibilities worth considering, and some discussion of activist
research would be both appropriate and welcome.

Nonetheless, Writing Partnerships is a much-needed contribution to the con-
versations on service-learning, especially discussions concerned with alternatives to
classroom-based writing instruction. Ambitious in range, elegant in design, accom-
plished in scholarship, Writing Partnerships is an exceptional resource for writing
faculty who envision their professional commitments to exceed the academy.

More pointedly concerned with forms of community-based inquiry, however, is
Literacy and Democracy: Teacher Research and Composition Studies in Pursuit of Habiti-
able Spaces, edited by Cathy Fleischer and David Schaafsma. This collection of ten
essays and research reports constitutes a “sort of Festschrift” in honor of Jay
Robinson—eminent teacher, scholar, and advocate of community literacy research
at the University of Michigan. In the words of the editors, the collective purpose of
these essays is to make a contribution to the “field of literacy education” (xxiv) and,
simultaneously, to pay homage to the enduring influence of a much-admired teacher.

Reflective of Robinson’s work in both literacy education and school-university
collaborations, the chapters gathered here can be seen to fall upon two axes repre-
senting distinct but overlapping emphases: first, the learning populations addressed
by the various teacher-researchers and, second, the community sites where their
research is conducted. As to the former, we are acquainted with the literacy practices
of secondary Latino students, the poetry of fifth-graders, the analysis of text-gener-
ated talk among preservice teachers of literature, a collaborative drama project link-
ing secondary night school students with middle-class college students, and soon.
As to the latter, we are introduced to a number of sites where literacy research occurs: a guerilla theater project on the streets of Ann Arbor, a comic-book club for upper-elementary students, an electronic book club for soon-to-be student teachers, a shelter for battered women, a community college classroom, and so on. The sheer variety of groups and sites represented in these chapters is impressive, to say the least. But more than that, these chapters, taken together, serve as an indicator of the rich possibilities for conducting teacher research in our communities.

Among the several excellent essays included in this collection, Carol Winkelmann’s “Unsheltered Lives: Battered Women Talk about School” is illustrative, I think, of Literacy and Democracy’s guiding purpose. Several years ago, Winkelmann volunteered at an urban shelter for battered women, both to perform community service and “to learn as an ethnolinguist about women and violence” (104). Her essay is, she notes, a narrative of her “border crossing” between “the cultures of the shelter and of the university” (107). Starting out with the conventional tools and methods of the ethnographer, Winkelmann began to realize early on that her researcher identity underwent a shift as a result of being asked to form a story-writing circle. At an early moment in her project, she began to see herself more as a literacy worker, and “to proffer a public identity as a teacher-researcher” (105).

Once a week, Winkelmann would meet with her story-writing circle and listen to the women tell their stories. Out of these conversations, the group would agree upon a topic, write about that topic, read aloud their individual writings, and then discuss one another’s work. Usually (but not always), the chosen topics would somehow address “their shattered lives” and each woman’s struggle to confront the enduring effects of violent abuse. As she listened to the women educate one another “about violence against womankind,” Winkelmann learned how to see group members not only as collaborators but also as teachers and social activists. She learned a good deal about how women, these women, “used language to negotiate their way in an unkind world” (106). And she began to wonder about the relationship “between the school life of girls and the adult life of battered women” (108).

According to Winkelmann, shelter women inhabit a world whose devastating circumstances offer insight into the many ways schools fail girls and young women. Listening to their stories, conducting literacy sessions and in-depth interviews, Winkelmann was able to identify the generative themes of significance for the women in this group: that school is about relationship, not location; that school doles out inequities on the basis of putative merit, class, and gender assumptions; and that the absence of mentors in their formal schooling increases girls’ vulnerability in later life because, without mentors, the ability to imagine alternate futures is curtailed, diminished. On this last point, Winkelmann observes that, notwithstanding the lack of mentors in their formal schooling, shelter women mentor each other and, in the
process, discover “a critical feature of mentoring left out of accounts by academics and educators [. . .] a sense of collective agency” (121). According to Winkelmann, it is this quality of mutual co-agency that literacy workers need to foster in their community work.

In its activist commitments, in its premise of literacy as conversation, in its situational and thus flexible approach to method, Winkelmann’s chapter is representative of the other fine pieces appearing in *Literacy and Democracy* — and representative, too, of Jay Robinson’s fundamental point about literacy. As Robinson states in his framing chapter, the “greatest promise of literacy [is] to offer means [. . .] to connect what is deeply personal with what is deeply and meaningfully public in attempts to make and remake public spaces of dialogue and possibility” (5). In her foreword, Jacqueline Jones Royster notes that the literacy envisioned by Robinson and the authors collected in this volume “is at once civil and civic” (xxvi). Literacy, for Robinson and these authors, thus serves a bridging function, joining the personal and the public, the civic and the school and the community.

But where, then, does that leave the English classroom—especially the composition classroom, the one site where writing and (usually) reading are mandated activities for the vast majority of America’s first-year students? In other words, how can the classroom itself be understood as a civic or community arena, a space where students can exercise discursive influence in ways that are decidedly public in nature? This is only one of the questions Christian Weisser tries to address in his *Moving beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*.

A good case can be made that, compared to some of our colleagues in other specialties, compositionists have been rather slow to warm to public sphere theory. But there are clear signs that many in composition studies are beginning to examine the work of Jürgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, Nancy Fraser, and others to evaluate the implications of such theory upon writing instruction. As Weisser notes, important essays by John Trimbur, Susan Wells, and Irene Ward have begun to explore Habermasian thought for its ability to suggest new directions for composition. But as Weisser also notes, their works must be understood as building upon an already existing interest in public writing apparent in the earlier (non-Habermasian) writings of, among others, Michael Halloran, Lester Faigley, and Joseph Harris.

This sense of continuity, in fact, is quite important to Weisser as he takes considerable pains to show that our current interest in public writing is an extension of the “social turn” that occurred in composition studies during the mid- to late eighties. The first portion of this book is largely a history of composition studies, detailing its consolidation as a discipline and providing special attention to “radical approaches to composition” that emerged along with the social turn mentioned above. Much of this history may seem familiar, and therefore unnecessary, to some readers, but Weisser’s purpose is to offer an alternative reading of our discipline as a move-
ment toward more public forms of writing. Weisser may be correct in speculating that public writing could “well become the next dominant focal point around which the teaching of college writing is theorized and imagined” (42). But if this should occur, it will not happen in any noticeably disruptive way—not as a dramatic upheaval, or revolution, or paradigm shift, or pronounced rupture of any sort. It will occur, instead, as a reasonable development, continuous with our present conversations.

From this historical survey, Weisser moves to an excellent summary and analysis of the premier historians and theorists of the public sphere—Habermas, of course, and Richard Sennett too, but also theoretical challengers to Habermas in particular—the most important being Nancy Fraser, Oskar Negt, and Alexander Kluge. Weisser does an admirable job of explaining a number of very difficult texts, ideas, and arguments in ways that make them not only accessible but also necessary to an understanding of the final two chapters of his book. In his concluding chapters, then, Weisser invites us to consider what “a new conception of public writing” (93) might involve, and thus what new conception of the public intellectual might follow.

Drawing upon his earlier discussions, Weisser examines some of the problems with what might be considered a quintessentially bad public writing assignment, to wit: “[W]rite a letter to the editor of [your] local newspaper on a current topic.” Weisser allows that such an assignment could potentially be a good one, but in its starkest form, it seems to assume no authentic exigency or sincere interest on the student’s part. Nor does it assume that much of anything will happen as a result of such a letter and, for that reason, an assignment like this one, says Weisser, may likely be “counterproductive” to the best of our pedagogical intentions (94).

Weisser suggests, instead, that a good public writing assignment will invite students to bring a social and historical consciousness to bear upon the issues they are investigating, to see public discourse as always “ideologically interested,” emphasizing “the ways in which material forces shape what gets said, who gets heard, and how these forces have structured public discourse” (98). He also advocates devising assignments that “highlight for students the degree to which their social status and differences from others will affect how their writing is evaluated” (103). Moving from the generic universalism of received ideas about “the public” and “common concerns,” his preferred assignment asks students to situate themselves within discourses where publics are multiple and concerns are not required to be “common” in order to be considered important. Finally, Weisser suggests that, where possible, teachers imagine assignments that may have some part in effecting real change—in policies adopted by student governments or in rules governing life in residence halls. To illustrate what a public writing pedagogy of this sort might look like, Weisser offers a description of an advanced composition course he taught, “Environmental Discourse and Public Writing.” In the wake of a largely theoretical discussion of
public writing, Weisser's concrete descriptions of his own course are both welcome and instructive.

In his final chapter, Weisser considers if, how, and in what ways the compositionist might be considered a public intellectual. After reviewing the vexed definitions we have of this term, Weisser offers three interconnected ways by which the compositionist can become a public intellectual. Weisser claims that in our classrooms, our scholarship, and our everyday lives, compositionists become public intellectuals through the opportunities they have to enact practices that have some bearing upon their universities, their local communities, and the multiple publics that make up civic life at all levels. Weisser suggests that just as publics are contested, material, and historical formations, so too are public intellectuals. “We are capable of various forms of public intellectualism,” says Weisser, “but only if we can realize this goal through our intellectual occupations, not instead of them” (123). This, it seems to me, is an understanding of the public intellectual that Posner would not abide but that Cushman would applaud.

Moving beyond Academic Discourse is by far the most comprehensive attempt yet to identify and evaluate the implications of public-sphere theory for composition studies. Weisser's understanding of the complex issues and arguments surrounding this theory, his thoughtful applications to classroom practices, his ability to situate these ideas within the discipline’s literature—all such strengths emerge together to form a knowledgeable and useful guide for writing teachers who wish to approach public writing in an informed way.

Here, then, are three books that, despite their distinct emphases, represent versions of the kind of work enacted by community intellectuals—teachers, scholars, informed citizens, whose work goes largely unsung and unnoticed. Community intellectuals are obviously needed for the kind of valuable work they perform. But community intellectuals are also needed because, so named, they throw into dialectical relief the many challenges facing public intellectuals—the recurring temptation among public intellectuals to regard policy as something separate from place, to understand action as something limited to debate and deliberation, to equate rhetorical ethos with something akin to cachet and celebrity. In a word, then, what community intellectuals do is embody intellectual work, give it a human face, a face able to confront the human faces of our neighbors and citizens in a cooperative spirit of making our communities better—more hopeful, more sustainable, more just places to live. Together, these books mirror those faces.

Works Cited
