Basic Writers in Composition's Public Turn: Voice and Influence in the Basic Writing Classroom

Christopher Minnix

ABSTRACT: *While basic writing has made a public turn by incorporating service learning and community literacy pedagogies, basic writers are not often discussed in the vast and growing research on public writing in composition studies. Scholarship on public writing in composition has produced important discussions of the outcomes of public writing pedagogy, but the "incomes" of public writing—the experiences, cultural and linguistic differences, and knowledge of and dispositions towards public life—that students bring to public writing classrooms have gone largely unexplored. Scholars and teachers of basic writing can productively challenge public writing pedagogy to attend to these incomes by expanding their research on socioeconomic and cultural difference and access to students' writing in the public realm. I develop this argument out of current educational research on youth and civic engagement, beginning with a discussion of what Meira Levinson has called the "civic empowerment gap" among poor and minority students. I argue that the literacy narrative is a genre that provides students with rich opportunities to explore and negotiate the "incomes" they bring to public writing, as well as a genre that can be utilized and adapted for public persuasion.*

KEYWORDS: *civic empowerment gap; public writing; literacy narratives; basic writing*

Over the past two decades, research in composition studies has called for a "public turn" (Mathieu xv) in composition, one that expands students' understanding of writing in the public sphere, fosters their political agency, and engages them in writing for a variety of public audiences (Wells, Weisser, Mathieu, Welch, Ervin). For many of us who teach public writing, public writing assignments such as PSAs (Selfe and Selfe), zines (Farmer), news articles and letters (Gogan), community publishing projects (Parks), and political video remixes (Dubisar and Palmieri), become some of the most rewarding writing that our students do throughout the semester. The benefits of these assignments include increased facility in the outcomes outlined in the "WPA Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition"—rhetorical knowledge, awareness of genre, multimodal composing processes—as well as an increased understanding of the civic functions of rhetoric and writing.

***Christopher Minnix** is Assistant Professor of English and Director of Freshman Composition at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.*

Public writing pedagogy seeks to provide students with real-world rhetorical capacities for rhetorical engagement and to correct an imbalance that Douglas Hesse has described as the difference between writing "*about* the civic sphere, not *in* it" (qtd. in Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel 171). Such a pedagogy creates opportunities for students to write for audiences outside of the classroom and within the communities they inhabit. At the same time, many contemporary discussions of public writing have pointed to increasing opportunities for public writing in students' virtual communities due to the availability of accessible and powerful digital media platforms. These platforms, as Kathleen Yancey has argued, contribute to a "new era in literacy" (5). Public writing scholarship and pedagogy have focused on a variety of print and digital genres; but, following Yancey, a significant amount of contemporary research in public writing has turned to the relationship between digital media and public writing (Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel; Selfe and Selfe; New London Group; Dubisar and Palmieri). Community literacy, service-learning, and multimodal public rhetoric expand the audiences of student writing and invest students with rhetorical knowledge that enables them to become more engaged and effective citizens.

While public writing research in composition has developed significant pedagogical strategies, theoretical frameworks, and outcomes, there is little discussion of basic writing students in this literature. Basic writing scholarship has, of course, made its own public turns, especially through efforts to integrate service learning into the basic writing classroom. Debates over the value of service learning for basic writing students have pointed to its importance in investing students with civic agency (Davi; Gabor; Arca; Pine), but have also pointed to specific curricular challenges to integrating service learning into basic writing classes (Adler-Kassner "Digging a Groundwork"), and to ways in which service learning might actually limit the agency of basic writing students (Kraemer). While I believe that public writing—in its many forms, including service learning—can bring many benefits to the basic writing classroom, my objective here goes beyond simply arguing for bringing the resources of public writing pedagogy and theory to bear on basic writing. Instead, I want to test a broader claim. Basic writing teachers and scholars can productively challenge public writing pedagogy to attend more fully to "incomes" of public writing—the prior experiences, attitudes, cultural knowledge, material differences, and rhetorical knowledge that students bring to public writing and explore how these "incomes" of public writing shape students' inventional processes.

As teachers who work with students who often feel marginalized not only within the academy but also within public life, basic writing teachers are well-positioned to examine the incomes students bring to public writing courses and assignments. In their study of students' prior genre knowledge, Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi draw on Min-Zhan Lu's discussion of "discursive resources" to define their concept of students' "incomes" to writing in the university (313). Lu defines students' "discursive resources" as "the often complex and sometimes conflicting templates of languages, englishes, discourses, senses of self, visions of life and notions of one's relations with others and the world" (qtd. in Reiff and Bawarshi 313). By pointing to students' *public incomes*, I seek to expand this focus on incomes to the public writing classroom. Basic writing teachers are poised to explore strategies for fostering students' voices within contexts of inequality, develop pedagogical strategies that enable students to confront and critically approach those inequities, and help students negotiate the tension between the expression of their personal voice and public action. While the approach to public writing I develop focuses on the contributions of basic writing to public writing theory and pedagogy, this project also reflects recent calls in public writing research to redefine the relationship between public writing, public participation, and public influence (Gogan; Rivers and Webber). I argue that basic writing teachers and scholars can expand the idea of public participation even further by investigating how cultural, economic, and academic inequities constrain public participation for many of our students and how public writing projects in basic writing classes can work against these constraints.

Though public writing and civic education are distinctly different enterprises, research in civic education has pointed to how socioeconomic disparities significantly limit access to civic education programs in underfunded public schools. I touch upon this research in order to illustrate that, for many of our basic writing students, programs that promote civic engagement in secondary schools are absent. This point is especially important during a time when action-oriented civics education, often referred to as "New Civics," has drawn upon service learning and opportunities for public writing to redefine civics in American high schools. Many students from middle-class and wealthy schools could arrive in composition classes having benefitted from civic engagement programs and having developed a positive sense of their civic agency. However, students from poorer schools often have limited, if any, exposure to civic engagement in their K-12 education. This educational inequity creates what educational researcher Meira

Levinson has called a "civic empowerment gap" (316) based on race and class divisions in the American educational system. Acknowledging this gap in public writing courses is vital because it impacts the way we frame public participation and the efficacy of public discourse for our students. In practical terms, for public writing projects in basic writing classrooms, this gap can have a constraining effect on students' perception of the value of public writing assignments, their understanding of their public agency, and their attitudes towards participating in public life.

Rather than simply lamenting this gap, however, I argue that it provides an opportunity for basic writing teachers to do the work of public and civic empowerment where it matters most. To do this work, we need to develop a public writing pedagogy that resists culturally homogeneous conceptions of students as budding public citizens and instead draws on students' experiences and perceptions of public life as a rich site of invention and participation. A variety of different pedagogical strategies can help us understand the incomes of public writing. Here, I focus on literacy narrative as a genre of public writing that can enact this pedagogy. Though the literacy narrative is often described as a genre positioned between student voice and academic discourse, placing the literacy narrative in the context of public writing positions it within a space that a growing body of research on civic engagement has termed as a space between "voice" and public "influence" (Cohen and Kahne; Allen and Light). The literacy narrative has often been linked to a growing sense of civic agency and conceived as a genre that enables students to recognize the public agency of their personal experience and voice (Danielewicz; DeRosa; Soliday "Translating Self"; *Politics of Remediation*). I build on this understanding of the literacy narrative by acknowledging its role as a public genre, examining the analogous relationship of the literacy narrative to other genres of public discourse and exploring the literacy narrative not simply as a public genre itself but as a site of continued rhetorical invention and public engagement.

The "Civic Empowerment Gap" and Its Implications for Basic Writing

Though many public writing classrooms are designed to promote civic engagement (Ervin), there are distinct differences between civic education and public writing. Public writing pedagogy is most often rooted to the work of writing classrooms and often conceives of writing and rhetoric as civic action (Ervin), public activism (Mathieu; Wells; Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel),

or discourse in the public sphere (Wells, Weisser, Farmer). Contemporary civic education programs, by contrast, are often more broadly focused on initiating students into civic life and enabling them to understand the roles that they might play as citizens. Unlike earlier civic education programs, many civic education programs developed over the past twenty years are now action-focused rather than knowledge-focused and seek to cultivate students' abilities to engage in public discourse. Rather than pursuing the broader project of synthesizing these two pedagogies, we might draw on the research in civic education to explore how conditions of economic, cultural, and academic inequity shape students' perceptions of public participation and impact their attitudes and responses to public writing assignments.

A 2009 report prepared by PACE (Philanthropy for Civic Engagement) documents how "increases in voting, volunteering, and other forms of civic engagement are driven disproportionately by young people from higher-income families and communities" (Zaff, Youniss, and Gibson 6). The report points to a range of educational studies that have shown that this distinct difference in civic participation is not driven by the "disinterest" of lower-income groups but by "an imbalanced distribution of educational, political, and/or civic resources and opportunities" (7). In *No Citizen Left Behind*, Meira Levinson terms this imbalance "the civic empowerment gap" (48). In contrast to arguments that lower-income students are less interested in civic engagement, Levinson argues "the civic empowerment gap is no more natural or inevitable than the academic achievement gap is" (48). For Levinson, this gap points to structural and material inequities that must be addressed, but it also points to the need to rethink and adapt civic education for students from different cultural and economic backgrounds. She argues that, "schools need to take seriously the knowledge and experiences of low-income youth and adults of color—to teach in ways that are consonant with and that even build upon their knowledge and experience, in ways that are engaging and empowering rather than disaffecting and disempowering" (54). Levinson's argument stands in stark contrast to the approach of traditional civic education, or "old civics," which presumed homogeneous understandings of students as potential civic actors and privileged knowledge of civic life and institutions over student experiences.

Instead, Levinson argues for "new civics" approaches, which she locates in the pedagogical project known as *action civics*. The methods of action civics are more closely aligned with the goals and objectives of public writing classrooms. Though action civics and public writing pedagogy are different projects, action civics uses rhetorical performance and reflection

as key forms of civic participation. Levinson presents the Mikva Challenge, a Chicago-based youth civic engagement initiative, as a key example. She argues that the "six stages of civic action" that the Mikva Challenge presents are representative of most action civics initiatives across the country: "examine your community; choose an issue; research the issue and set a goal; analyze power; develop strategies; take action to affect policy" (225). Such projects ask students to "learn through citizenship and not just about citizenship" while also asking students to "reflect upon the experience as a means of consolidating their learning and empowering them to take effective action in the future" (225). These stages of action will seem immediately familiar to many public writing teachers and point to an important connection between new approaches to civic education in K-12 education and many action-oriented approaches to public writing.

What is distinctive about Levinson's approach, however, is her focus on how the perspectives, socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and prior experiences students bring to bear on civic life shape their visions of civic participation. Levinson's work points to the importance of understanding how differences in race, class, and community shape students' relationship to public life. For Levinson, cultural difference is not a pre-political condition to transcend, but a rich resource for developing pedagogies that draw on students' experiences with power and participation. Levinson's argument resonates with research on basic writing that has looked at how issues of race, language, economic class, and schooling shape basic writing students' relationship to academic writing (Adler-Kassner and Harrington *Basic Writing*; Gray-Rosendale; Carter; Horner and Lu). At the same time, her action-oriented approach reflects what Victor Villanueva has characterized as a need to reconceive basic writers "as rhetorical power players. . ." (101), as rhetorical agents who can work with teachers to challenge and subvert institutional racism and inequity in higher education (103). Referencing Bartholomae, Villanueva argues that "inventing the university" is:

> a mutually conscious decision, not just foisted on basic writers but encouraged as a jointly agreed upon strategy, not with the idea that students become like teachers but rather that students learn how to gain the trust of teachers so that a communal learning can take place, what Fanon calls "a world of reciprocal recognitions." (103)

While this research has often focused on academic writing, both its insistence on bringing students' voices, perspectives, and identities into discussions of

literacy and the strategies it provides for enabling students to develop a critical understanding of their literacies can be brought to bear on public writing scholarship. Basic writing research on the dynamic relationship between student identities and academic literacy can be utilized to unpack both the barriers to public engagement that our students face and the potential access points to public discourse that are rooted in their experiences.

Levinson's discussion of "action civics" provides for engaging students in reflective, critical acts of public participation and illustrates the necessity of pedagogical approaches that negotiate the continuum between personal voice and public influence in public writing. Recognizing students' public incomes is not sufficient to foster students' sense of public engagement and agency. To do this requires developing strategies that enable students to recognize how the attitudes, experiences, and knowledge of public life that they bring to public writing can serve as a rich source of rhetorical invention for public writing. Following Villanueva, we need to extend Bartholomae's formative understanding of how basic writing students' "invent the university" (4) by exploring how they also invent the public when they compose public writing projects. Such an approach can help us perceive how differences in class, race, and prior education present specific opportunities and barriers to public as well as academic writing. By attuning ourselves to how basic writers draw on their experiences, knowledge, and attitudes to invent the public, we can usefully complicate our understanding of how socioeconomic, geographic, linguistic, and cultural differences shape our students' perceptions of public discourse and their sense of public voice and agency. While this will require the development of a wide range of pedagogical strategies, the literacy narrative, a common assignment in many basic writing classrooms, offers perhaps one of the best opportunities for negotiating the relationship between students' public incomes and the outcomes of public writing classes.

Literacy Narratives at the Nexus of Public Voice and Influence

A rich body of work on the literacy narrative has pointed to the politics of the genre and its ability, as Mary Soliday has argued, to enable basic writing students to "translate" private experiences into public discourses (*Politics of Remediation* 150). In "Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narratives," Soliday explains that "in focusing upon those moments when the self is on the threshold of possible intellectual, social, and emotional development, literacy narratives become sites of self-translation where writers

can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds" (511). Soliday's understanding of "self-translation" usefully locates the literacy narrative as a site of rhetorical tension and negotiation, one that captures the push and pull of students' interactions with public discourse. Jane Danielewicz has argued that personal writing, like the literacy narrative, fosters public writing by investing students with authority and adding an element of risk to student writing: "Students become invested as writers when they realize that being articulate *when something is at stake* (when they feel personally vulnerable, not when they are secure) is what launches individuals into public life" (444). Such writing connects the concept of voice, which has been critiqued in critical readings of expressivism, to "social action and power" (423). Understood in this way, literacy narratives are positioned at the nexus between students' private and public lives, and the construction of the literacy narrative serves as an opportunity for teachers and students to engage in the dynamic production of a public self.

In the same way that research on the literacy narrative has pointed to the narratives of academic access that often surface in students' literacy narratives, teaching the literacy narrative in the context of a public writing classroom can orient us towards the narratives of public life that frame students' conceptions of public participation and agency. In "Successes, Victims, and Prodigies: 'Master' and 'Little ' Cultural Narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre," Kara Poe Alexander has shown how students' literacy narratives often contain both "master narratives" of academic success, access, and victimhood and "little narratives" that are "more individualized and situated" and that "critique and challenge the dominant master narratives" (611). Alexander notes that little narratives are "often told by marginalized groups, such as women and minorities, whose stories run counter to the dominant literacy myths" (611). Her analysis of these little narratives in student writing leads her to argue for the role writing teachers can play in helping students recognize the power of their little narratives and in critically confronting the literacy myths that they often invoke in their literacy narratives (625). The analytical approach that Alexander maps out can also be used to help students confront master narratives of public engagement and agency and attune teachers to the little narratives of public life and engagement in students' literacy narratives.

Rather than beginning with public issues, specific sites of public discourse, or public policy, we can begin with students' experiences and work alongside students to unpack the master and little narratives of public life we find in their literacy narratives and explore opportunities from mov-

ing from voice to public engagement and influence. We might think, for example, of a student whose literacy experience entails the feeling that she has been betrayed by her writing instruction after a low SAT writing score. Such experiences contain immense potential for public engagement, but for that engagement to take place students need to negotiate the barriers that often stand between their personal voice and their possibilities for public influence. Literacy narratives are not simply assignments that are an end in themselves but can also be seen as sites for further invention.

Soliday and Alexander have shown that the literacy narrative is a genre at the nexus of the private and public, but arguing for the role of the literacy narrative in promoting public engagement requires extending their arguments in two ways. First, we can conceive of the literacy narrative as an adaptive public performance, one that not only fosters students' perception of their public agency, but that should also be considered as both an act of public rhetoric and as a site of rhetorical invention where teachers can help students see critical connections between their literacy narratives and other public genres. Second, because literacy narratives operate at the nexus between the private and the public, they can offer teachers insights into students' dispositions and knowledge of public life, especially when they are conceived of as a site for developing public arguments out of students' own experiences. A good deal of scholarship on the literacy narrative has pointed to its role as a public genre, but arguing for the literacy narrative's place in the public writing curriculum requires understanding its relationship to the assignments and genres of the public writing classroom. This places the literacy narrative in the context of one of the key areas of conflict in public writing pedagogy—the debate regarding the authenticity of public writing assignments.

Advocates for the public turn in composition have pointed to the need to account for students' public or civic identities (Welch, Mathieu, Ervin), but this research has often begun with considerations of assignments and how they can embody particular conceptions of public participation and agency for students rather than the experiences, attitudes, and knowledge students bring to public life. This conversation has tended to focus on the authenticity of public writing assignments—their relationship to authentic sites of public discourse, their circulation through real-world networks of public discourse, and their power to generate public persuasion (Wells, Weisser, Welch, Mathieu, Farmer, Gogan). If we survey the literature on public writing pedagogy, we find a range of genres often thought of as "authentic"—zines and counter-public genres (Farmer), activist multimodal texts (Sheridan,

Baker, and Michel), street newspapers (Mathieu), community published texts (Parks), public service announcements (Selfe and Selfe), and genres found in service learning or community literacy spaces (Coogan; Heilker; Long). Each of these genres gains its authenticity through its "publicness"—its capacity for circulation and efficacy in a realm of public discourse outside of the classroom and its relationship to specific, interactive ecologies of writing (Rivers and Weber 190).

This emphasis on authenticity often leads to theoretical descriptions of the classroom's relationship to the public that conceive of it as being closer to or further from the authentic public realm. Classroom publics are "micropublics," which are part of the larger public discourse (Wells; Donnelli qtd in Farmer 9) or "protopublic spheres" (Eberly; Donnelli qtd. in Farmer 9) that conceive of the classroom as a preparatory public. Such conceptions of classroom publics are critiqued by arguments for service learning (Heilker), which promote placing students in the rhetorical ecologies of community organizations so that they can learn to take up rhetorical tactics and genres as participant-observers within the community, as well as develop a critical understanding of the role the genres play in constituting the work of the community. This key point of tension in public writing pedagogy underlines an important point: public writing classrooms project public space and conceptions of public agency for students, and public writing assignments, based on their authenticity or inauthenticity, can enrich or impoverish students' public agency.

Recent contributions to this debate have begun to argue for a more expansive understanding of agency and public participation. Brian Gogan's recent argument for the agency of the much-maligned "letter to the editor assignment" is one recent example of this ongoing debate over whether or not public writing assignments can capture realities of political participation. The letter to the editor, as Gogan argues, has long served as a lightning rod for critiques of inauthentic public writing throughout the development of public writing pedagogy, from its early critique in Susan Wells "Rogue Cops and Health Care" to its more recent critique in Frank Farmer's *Beyond the Public Turn*. For example, Christian Weisser, in *Beyond Academic Discourse*, argues that while the letter to the editor "could *potentially* be a useful writing assignment," it could also lead students to "come to feel that participating in 'public discourse,' if letters to the editor are indeed public discourse, has little effect on what happens in their world. They surmise that the public sphere is a realm where nothing actually gets accomplished—at least not by them" (94). Ultimately, this assignment has become the shibboleth of

public writing pedagogy largely because it is seen as an assignment that teaches students to value inauthentic public writing, or classroom writing masquerading as public writing.

Gogan argues, however, that such arguments tend to set up a rigid distinction between writing in the classroom and writing in real-world contexts: "To avoid this situational binary that fundamentally rejects pedagogy, public rhetoric and writing teachers need to supplement the definition of authenticity that is tied to location with a definition that connotes the practices by which a writer or reader might legitimate reality" (544). Gogan illustrates that arguments that hold authentic public persuasion as the end goal can actually limit our opportunities to introduce students to public writing. In contrast to public writing pedagogies that argue against assignments like the letters to the editor based on their inauthenticity and lack of real-world "efficacy" or change, Gogan argues for a public writing pedagogy "that emphasizes the premise of participation in addition to emphasizing the possibility of persuasion" (550). This approach recognizes that "an affirmative definition of efficacy must . . . begin with the initial step rhetors must take to attempt change, and that step appears to be participation" (548). Participation and persuasion are a continuum rather than a mutually exclusive binary (544). Gogan's argument for reconceiving participation is important, as it brings with it possibilities for exploring the variety of factors that engage students in public participation, shape the forms of public participation they choose, impact their understandings of their public agency, and prohibit their engagement.

Bringing participation into the debate over the efficacy and authenticity of public writing assignments opens up opportunities to expand public writing pedagogy in two important and interrelated ways: (1) by offering a greatly expanded sense of the assignments and genres that can be considered part of the public writing classroom and (2) by putting the incomes of public writing and public participation more squarely into focus in discussions of public writing curricula. Understanding participation and efficacy as a continuum greatly impacts the way that we understand the design of public writing assignments and curricula. Positioning persuasion as a possible end, rather than as the defining characteristic of public writing assignments, can enable public writing teachers to develop curricula and assignments that can more fully attend to the intersubjective processes of students' participation in public writing. We can, in other words, design assignments that put students' incomes—their experiences of public life, attitudes about public participation, and senses of public agency—more fully in dialogue with the

spaces and contexts of public persuasion. For students who have fallen into the civic empowerment gap that Levinson describes, this shift in perspective is vital. Concerns with publicity, authenticity, and efficacy (Gogan 537) are central to our understanding of public rhetoric, but overemphasizing these elements can lead us to ignore how participation in public discourse is viewed and enacted among students of varying socioeconomic and cultural communities. As basic writing teachers, we can challenge this tendency by exploring how experience, culture, and class shape students' perception of public participation.

The literacy narrative is an assignment that captures this understanding of public participation and its relationship to public persuasion or efficacy. If we use conceptions of public authenticity and effective public persuasion as criteria for the value of public writing, the literacy narrative may be read as having limited value as a public genre, as it is often written outside of the contexts of the publics and counterpublics described in public writing research. However, if we conceive of the literacy narrative as occupying a space between public participation and voice and public persuasion, we can begin to unpack its value for public writing curricula. As Anne Marie Hall and I have recently argued in the pages of this journal, positioning the literacy narrative in a curriculum where it is surrounded by powerful genres of academic writing can quickly diminish the agency students often gain from it by encouraging students to see the genre as a bridge to more important academic writing (75). We reconceived the literacy narrative as a genre that can be used to build an entire basic writing curriculum, rather than as a bridge to academic writing. Here, I want to suggest that the literacy narrative can also serve as the basis for developing a public writing curriculum for basic writing classrooms. However, I also want to take the argument a step further by saying that within such a curriculum the literacy narratives of our basic writing students can challenge us as educators to envision new strategies for teaching public writing to students whose conceptions of public life have been shaped by the economic, cultural, and academic inequities that Levinson has described as the "civic empowerment gap." Though not all of our students will fall into this category, a good many will, and their literacy narratives might teach us how, as Levinson has argued, to "build upon their knowledge and experiences, in ways that are engaging and empowering" (54).

Building a Public Writing Curriculum from the Literacy Narrative

Literacy narratives can be paired with the teaching of public writing in a variety of ways. In her study of the literacy narrative and "rhetorical awareness," Susan DeRosa's approach, for example, specifically links literacy narratives to public writing assignments, and in doing so argues that such projects promote a vision of "literacy in action," in which "writers recognize their potential as writers to evoke change and to write for contexts beyond the classroom and in the public sphere" (11). DeRosa illustrates how pairing literacy narratives with public writing assignments can sponsor students understanding of their civic agency and their future public action. In the classrooms DeRosa describes, students use literacy narratives as a means of reflecting on acts of public engagement, such as service learning projects. This approach is highly valuable, but I want to argue here for reconceiving the literacy narrative as a genre of public participation that can be adapted *for* public persuasion or that can be utilized as a rich site of rhetorical invention that can *lead students to* additional genres and opportunities for public persuasion. To reconceive the literacy narrative in this way means, practically, reframing the literacy narrative as both the beginning point and centerpiece of a public writing curriculum.

In addition to providing basic writing teachers with key strategies for understanding how our students' conceive of public participation and their public agency, understanding the positions that the literacy narrative can take on the continuum between public participation and persuasion speaks to what contemporary research on youth and civic engagement has termed the relationship between "voice and influence" (Allen and Light; Cohen and Kahne; Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen; Zuckerman). In their contribution to the recent collection *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in a Digital Age*, Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, and Danielle Allen argue that the expansion of opportunities for cultural participation brought about by new media is reshaping our understanding of civic participation (37). Based on studies of youth and civic engagement—some of which I will discuss below—they argue that youth are using new media to reshape our understanding of "participatory politics": "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern" (41). To understand how youth develop public voice and seek to exert public influence requires "re-examining the kinds of socializing experiences that are likely to lead youth (and others) to commit to civic and

political engagement, clarifying the literacies that are necessary for success in participatory politics, and identifying the types of support that will be necessary for engagement of this kind" (47). Like the discussion of participation and persuasion above, this work recognizes participation and influence as a continuum and points towards an understanding of participation as an act of negotiating the relationship between personal and public identities.

I touch briefly upon this research here because it illustrates, I believe, the richness of exploring the literacy narrative in the context of public writing classrooms. This growing body of research brings us back to Danielewicz's argument that despite a tradition of research that has questioned whether "voice is a legitimate concept," personal genres can be understood as opportunities for students to cultivate a public voice (423). The published literacy narratives that many of us teach—bell hooks, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Malcolm X—have always underlined this point. A more recent development, however, is the role digital media and digital publishing platforms play in enabling personal narratives to circulate as public arguments. For example, in her study of the online storytelling practices of DREAMers, Cristina Beltrán has shown how the young Dream Act activists who created the website *Dreamers Adrift* have utilized social media to "create an alternative public sphere" in which they share personal narratives, or "cyber-*testimonios*" (91) of their own lives as undocumented youth to "queer the politics of immigration" (81). Such acts of public voice utilize new media as a platform for storytelling practices that enable DREAMers to represent themselves not "as a criminalized population who are simply spoken *about* but instead are *speaking* subjects and agents of change" (81). What research like Beltrán's shows is that the cultivation of voice is central to our understanding of the public participation practices of youth in online spaces and that personal genres can be adapted and used for public participation and political change.

Seen in this context, literacy narratives have perhaps more civic potential than a range of other genres that we teach across the first year curriculum because they create rich opportunities for discussing public audience and ethos, circulation, delivery, kairos, medium, and even recomposition into other genres. When we compare the public voice and persona that students must construct as they develop and share their literacy narratives, we cannot help but notice that literacy narratives break the comfortable anonymity that so often characterizes the rhetorical audiences of many academic assignments, including the letter to the editor. In addition, in many of our classrooms, literacy narratives are not simply read by teachers, but are performed, enacted. Students do not simply "read" their literacy

narratives; they often, as one of my colleagues puts it, give "readings" of them.[1] Such performances do not simply have a political context, but can also be understood and fostered as an important entryway for students into civic life as well as academic life.

An example of a recent literacy narrative from my department's basic writing program illustrates how the assignment can offer an entryway for integrating public writing and civic education in the basic writing classroom. Working with a talented teacher, the student not only wrote her narrative but also developed and rehearsed its delivery for her audience so that she could ultimately upload a video of her reading the narrative to the *Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives*. Her literacy narrative, like so many in the archive, becomes less a classroom assignment and more a public performance. As she reads her narrative, her work on rhetorical delivery and connecting with her audience is fully on display as she modulates her tone and uses her distinctive voice to underline her main ideas. Her narrative, which focuses on the earliest literacy experience of learning to read, places us in a moment of tension between herself and her siblings, who joke and laugh at her inability to read. We are aware that while this experience is not unique, the author has something important to tell us about the relationship between family and literacy and the way in which familial discourses about our abilities and limitations can impact our sense of agency and ultimately shape our goals. At the same time, however, while her literacy narrative evokes a powerful public voice and serves as a moment of public participation, the move towards public influence or persuasion requires an additional process of invention. To understand the public potential of her literacy narrative we need to think critically about the public processes, knowledge, and conventions of the genre itself and the possibilities of circulation and impact that the genre might have.

When we compare the student's literacy narrative to the public writing projects in many of our courses, we find striking similarities—the ability to use narrative to develop a significant argument about public life and the political forces that shape it, the construction of a rhetorical ethos that creates identification with the audience, the ability to use voice and tone to deliver the argument in a compelling style, and the rhetorical savvy to use a digital medium to help the author connect with his or her audience and increase its chances of circulation. While the literacy narrative is sometimes considered out of place in academic writing, as a rhetorical performance it shares tactics and rhetorical processes that can promote further public discourse and circulation. We might conceive, for example, of a basic writ-

ing classroom where student literacy narratives are linked to the writing of public arguments in which students define themselves in relationship to the discourses of remediation that surround US higher education. Such a classroom could draw on the powerful ethos that students develop in their literacy narratives in order to create discourses that contest the view of remedial students as "underprepared" or "mediocre." We can imagine how public audiences of university administrators and teachers might serve as a compelling audience for these projects.

Constructing such an audience, however, brings up questions of circulation and impact that can lead to rich opportunities for civic education. Students can be challenged to think of how their literacy narratives might embody a particular kairos that enables their argument to have more rhetorical impact. In addition, students seeking public audiences for their literacy narratives might also think about how their performances might be read in specific public contexts. Recently, Shereen Inayatulla has shown how, for example, literacy narratives can sometimes be read in ways that create troubling subject positions for their authors, such as the position of "model minorities" (7). There is every possibility that students' narratives could be read in ways that diminutively characterize or exoticize them while ignoring their political agency. Students' public performances could be read as students publicly performing the role of the underprepared student made good. This is certainly an authentic problem of public discourse, one that can be used to challenge students to think about how they might use their public rhetoric to confront this reading, whether in their literacy narrative itself or in future public discourse. Such an assignment can go far beyond the "inauthentic" public argument assignments that are often critiqued in the literature on public writing and offer our basic writing students not only an awareness that their writing can have impact, but also the rhetorical education to make an impact.

In this important sense, literacy narratives can enable us to understand public writing as a complicated, even agonistic site of writing where students seek to gain access to public discourse but also where they negotiate their own conceptions of their public selves. This means that while literacy narratives and other assignments might enable us to critically understand students' public incomes, we should not reduce them to a pedagogical starting point, or a set of prior dispositions to be transcended as students' gain access to the public sphere. At the same time, we should not hold students' public incomes as an end point in themselves, which can create problematic identities such as "model minorities" (Inayatulla 7). Instead, we may glimpse

students' public incomes at various times and places in our public writing curricula, through literacy narratives, reflective writing, and other assignments and understand them as opportunities to work with our students to critically pursue opportunities for voice and influence.

Conclusion

This article has argued that basic writing teachers and scholars can challenge public writing pedagogy to attend to the incomes of student's public writing and develop a public writing curriculum out of students' experiences and voices. I would like to conclude by suggesting that this project can also play a role in helping teachers of basic writing challenge the frames of policy discourse (Adler-Kassner, *The Activist WPA*; Adler-Kassner and Harrington "Here and Now") that position basic writing students outside of public discourse. As Mike Rose has recently noted in an article for *Inside Higher Education*, "The de facto philosophy of education we do have is a strictly economic one. This is dangerous, for without a civic and moral core it could easily lead to a snazzy 21st-century version of an old and shameful pattern in American education: working-class people get a functional, skills-and-drills education geared toward lower-level work" ("Remediation at a Crossroads"). Rose's statement resonates with descriptions of remediation in national policy discourse on civic education. This discourse often refers to the education of remedial students as a "civic challenge" (Astin 130) that needs to be addressed in order to increase social and economic mobility rather than as a process of educating publicly engaged students. We need to develop arguments that draw on both the public writing of our basic writing students and our own studies of the public incomes our students bring to public writing.

I have pointed here to the necessity of bringing the voices of basic writing students into public writing, but to resist and alter the frame of "remedial student as civic challenge," we need to also conduct more research into the civic lives of our basic writing students. Such research will include not only their political attitudes and their conceptions of the political agency available to them but also the forms of political participation familiar to them, as well as the public genres and civic media that they have experience using outside of our classrooms. This research is important because without it we might run the risk of assuming what our basic writing students *don't know* about public participation and persuasion and overlooking what they *do know*. As Nancy Welch, Ellen Cushman, and others have taught us, the as-

sumption that social change cannot be successfully carried out by working class people is a form of "historical amnesia" (Welch 124). While acknowledging the civic empowerment gap, we should not construct a problematic vision of ourselves as public "missionaries" any more than we should portray ourselves as the literacy missionaries that Cushman critiques (Cushman; Welch 124). We simply need to know more about the prior civic experiences of our basic writing students, their prior engagement with political writing and genres, the discourse of their civic communities, and their conceptions of their own public agency.

One of the key areas of public participation we need to explore are our students' use of social media. The *Youth & Participatory Politics Survey Project* (YPPSP), a recent national study conducted by Cathy Cohen and Joseph Kahne on the civic participation of American youth from 18-25, points to several compelling lines of inquiry. The project found, for example, that "interest-driven" participation, participation not driven by politics, in online settings can be a powerful predictor of political participation: "Youth who were highly involved in nonpolitical, interest-driven activities are more than *five times* as likely to engage in participatory politics and nearly *four times* as likely to participate in all political acts, compared with those infrequently involved in such activities" (ix). Such nonpolitical activities include sharing information on a variety of topics not normally considered political, engaging in online discussions, and many other daily uses of social media. When the authors of the YPPSP study broke their survey respondents into two groups, those with a combined household income above $60,000 and those with a combined household income was below $60,000, they had to conclude that "when we take note of income we find that it does not have an effect on interest-driven participation" (23). Such claims should encourage us to examine the types of public participation that our basic writing students have prior knowledge of and to draw on their experiences develop opportunities to support their public writing.

Cohen and Kahane also return us to a consideration of how voice becomes influence: "the promise of a democratic society is predicated on the belief that political actors have more than voice—they must also have influence" (xi). Influence, perhaps more than access, is the challenge of any public writing classroom and perhaps a central reason for the immense importance of public writing pedagogy. For our basic writing students, influence is perhaps even more politically difficult, as the discourse of social mobility is powerful at the policy and curricular level and has a tendency to diminish both students' civic experiences and the opportunities for

students to engage in public writing in our classrooms. But basic writing teachers have often played a central role in confronting and permeating the borders of academic sovereignty created by educational policy, most importantly the border between students deemed worthy and unworthy of a college education. Basic writing teachers and scholars should extend this mission by confronting and resisting the borders of public access and influence—borders constructed by educational inequities that could limit the public participation of our students.

Acknowledgment

Note

1. I am indebted to my colleague Melba Major for this concept and for introducing me to the literacy narrative of her student, which I discuss and which can be found in the *Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives* by searching the title, "It Says, 'Learn How to Read.'" While I have argued that literacy narratives can link to opportunities for public writing, even if they are not explicitly intended to advance a public argument, there are ample examples of literacy narratives in the DALN that take a specific public turn. See Keith Dorwick's "Getting Called Fag" in the "Editors' Picks" section, among others, for excellent examples.

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