

Jennifer Beech and Julia Anderson

## **Teaching the Obama Generation: Helping Composition Students Enter and Remain in the Public Sphere**

AS CHRISTIAN WEISSER NOTES RECENTLY IN *MOVING BEYOND Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, the new key word in composition studies is public. Indeed, for quite some time, critical pedagogues have been at a quandary in considering how to get students to think beyond single-authored arguments and problematic service-learning pedagogies that position students as saviors or as resume builders. We believe that compositionists may be at a kairotic moment for involving college students as active citizens in public discourse if we take our cue from the Obama campaign, which targeted a young counterpublic ignored by other political campaigns to recruit and retain volunteers effectively enough to resoundingly win the 2008 United States Presidential election. We want to make clear up front, however, that we are not advocating recruiting college students for a particular political party (one of us voted for Obama, while the other did not) or even for encouraging a party affiliation. Rather, we feel the amount of youth involvement in the Obama campaign and beyond suggests that this current generation of students is, perhaps, more ready to mobilize for the purposes of a wide range of literate involvement in participatory democracy than any we've taught within the last few decades. Further, we urge compositionists teaching at variety of institutions—from two-year business and community colleges to other open-admissions schools to more top-tier universities—to adapt a range of pedagogical strategies for involving students in what they and we might consider relatively safe to more politically risky engagements with civic discourse and collective action.

As Elizabeth Mendez Berry notes in "The Obama Generation, Revisited," the President's campaign successfully recruited a youth population overlooked by previous presidential campaigns, going for youth under thirty in previously ignored urban, as well as rural areas. Thousands of youth volunteered for the campaign, which empowered them with responsibilities previously only given to senior staffers or seasoned volunteers: "team leader, campus captain, data coordinator, phone bank captain or house party captain" (Berry 14). Charged with a range of real responsibilities, these volunteers felt empowered on the campaign and beyond the election-day victory, which secured an historical "66 percent of voters under 30, increasing the Democratic share of the youth vote by 12 percent over 2004" (13).

Berry goes on to detail recent interviews with a range of volunteers, noting that almost all have continued their community involvement since the election: "As former staffer Marcus Ryan, 25, says, 'Once you turn on the community organizing perspective, it's hard to turn it off'" (qtd. in Berry 13). It is just this continued spirit of participatory democracy that we compositionists need to tap into.

## **Beyond Narrow Conceptions of the Public Sphere: Valuing Mini- and Counter-Publics**

President Obama and his staff are no strangers to the public sphere, for, of course, they have access to the bully pulpit: they may arrange town-hall meetings, make television or radio addresses, and give news conferences at will. Our students and we, ordinary citizens that we are, do not have such ready access to what Jurgen Habermas has identified as the bourgeois public sphere. As Weisser and others have noted, having students construct political arguments or even write letters to editors does not necessarily result in our students' engagement with the public sphere. Suggests Weisser, "Letters to the editor are one-way assignments; students put effort into writing them but get little subsequent response. . . . They surmise that the public sphere is a realm where nothing gets accomplished—at least not by them" (94). If we want our students to value and achieve sustained engagement with the public sphere, we need to help them recognize, locate, and strategize ways to enter a variety of public spheres (plural)—from more safe to more risky and from radical to more traditional iterations.

Certainly, no serious composition theorist can ignore the concept of the public sphere as put forth by Jurgen Habermas in his ground-breaking *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which posits an idealized 17th-century bourgeois public sphere in which everyone supposedly participated equally and bracketed their differences. DeLuca and Peebles' summary of the Habermasian public sphere is helpful for understanding its attractiveness to critical pedagogues wishing to help their students enter into it:

[I]deally the public sphere denotes a social space wherein private citizens gather as a public body with the rights of assembly, association, and expression in order to form public opinion. The public sphere mediates between civil society and the state, with the expression of public opinion working to both legitimate and check the power of the state. This public opinion is decidedly rational . . . (128)

Key feminists, like Nancy Fraser and Susan Wells, however, have been instrumental in helping us understand the limits of access into this idealized public sphere for non-dominant groups, arguing, instead for the usefulness of theorizing sub-altern counterpublics—smaller, safer, alternative spheres of discourse where collective, local action works to address civic issues and injustices. For Fraser, such subaltern public spheres are necessary to

increase the number of issues addressed in America's stratified society. According to Fraser, subaltern publics function both "as spaces where the oppressed can withdraw, regroup, and heal and . . . as 'training grounds' for the development of discourse or action that might agitate or disrupt wider publics" (Weisser 122-3). Along similar lines, Michael Warner asserts that "some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public" and "this type of public is—in effect—a counterpublic" (qtd. in Butler 60). For those not authorized in wider public forums, such counterpublics and/or mini-publics offer prime spots to be heard and to mobilize for collective action. To some extent, when we ask students to construct political arguments or to write letters to editors, we are asking them to imagine or literally enter into an intimidating wider public sphere, where they run the risk of attack or—perhaps worse—may simply be ignored.

Fraser, speaking from the perspective of a historically marginalized counterpublic—women—says that marginalized groups must find and use other mini-public spheres to get their concerns in the public ear. She gives the example of domestic violence, viewed historically as a private matter by the predominately white males who have traditionally dominated the public sphere. Feminists, tired of seeing their sisters abused and ignored, used journals, research centers, conferences, local meeting places and the media to bring this long-buried issue into the open and seek justice for battered women. Most importantly, feminists also negotiated with other public and private spheres to make domestic violence a legitimate common concern previously condemned in the public sphere. Effective communication with other, more prominent public spheres was the key to success here, and Weisser makes the point that different spheres must communicate with each other to be successful in promoting the common good. Indeed, Obama's volunteers effectively communicated with both smaller and larger publics to make his campaign successful; hence, we might, likewise, help our students locate and enter mini-, safer publics with the wider aim of them developing skills and strategies for eventually reaching out to ever-widening publics.

Weisser cites Susan Wells's article "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?" as his call-to-arms for championing entry into the public sphere (132).

"For those not authorized in wider public forums, such counterpublics and/or mini-publics offer prime spots to be heard and to mobilize for collective action."

Wells's powerful piece shows how an African-American Temple University student, Arthur Colbert, armed with knowledge of effective public communication, made a difference at the local level. In 1991, Colbert was an innocent victim of police brutality and racial injustice, but instead of being intimidated into "not making trouble," he used his college education and training to make enough trouble to topple the police force. The pen was mightier than the police! This was change on the local community level by a newly-minted member of the educated middle class. Colbert effectively used the police department's own sanctioned weapon—a complaint form provided and obtained at his corrupt local police station—to effect change for the common good simply by writing a coherent complaint: "The officer in charge was impressed: unlike other complaints against these policemen, Colbert's was 'coherent and concise, loaded with details'" (Wells 325). Wells expressed pride that this student had learned his skills at her university. Certainly, while we hope that none of our students finds themselves in similar situations, every composition teacher would be proud to have worked with that student because he effectively applied the skills he learned in his composition classes. Yet, Colbert's example is still that of single-authored authority, which in that instance was successful but in many instances would not be. Hence, we would argue for research projects and writing assignments that help students appreciate the value of a multi-pronged approach to civic discourse that combines more locally-based collective action with single and collaboratively-authored discourse.

## **Helping Students Locate, Research, and Collectively Enter Local Mini-Publics**

Think of the college classroom as, itself, a mini-public sphere, composed of the instructor and students from various races, classes, and (trans)genders, with various (dis)abilities and affiliations, and other competing/contradictory subjectivities. Capitalizing on this generation's success in entering various public spheres, instructors can act as further catalysts for getting students involved and maintaining the collective action momentum. Obama's volunteer slogan embodied the "Respect, Empower, Include" invitation, one which has potential for the college writing classroom as well. Using the college classroom to recruit students to actively participate in local or campus mini-publics can be a safe way for students to get their feet wet. Instructors who want their students to actively participate in the public sphere should teach WIFM (What's in It for Me) as a motivator at the college level. They can assign Susan Wells's article to showcase her example of a college student who successfully changed the system by writing a factual, well-thought-out complaint, which for our purposes is an argument. Julia, who teaches basic and professional writing at a business college, shares excerpts from Wells's article, summarizing the rest for her students as a way to engage them

in discussions about the possible uses for writing beyond the classroom. When Jennifer teaches a junior-level rhetoric and writing course comprised mostly of non-English majors, she assigns the entire article before beginning a unit on "Writing for Community and Civic Purposes." In essence, then, we make use of articles like "Rogue Cops" and other "success" stories to help our students believe that they can use writing to make a difference in their and others' lives. As writing teachers, of course we buy into Steve Benton's contention that, "Argument skills are portable. . . . Argument may not help you fix a carburetor, but it can help you negotiate a bank loan, which you can then use to open your own garage" (253); however, simply making such a claim to our students is not always or often convincing. Teaching, as we do, Southern students from mostly working-class backgrounds (whether they consciously claim that affiliation or not), we feel it is important to seek a range of strategies for helping student recognize the value of public discourse for fighting injustice, for as Patrick Finn has noted, often students from the working class have developed the "you can't fight city hall attitude" (86-87). Also, for students who come from communities where folks often depend upon collective authority (be it from front porch networks, church groups, unions, etc.), collective action projects present an especially empowering way for students from non-mainstream backgrounds to learn argument and other writing skills. As Alexandra Hidalgo contends, "Group work helps working-class students feel more comfortable with the learning process by recreating in the classroom the values of the collective over the individual that they grew up with at home, thus making their transition into college life a smoother one" (11).

Further, as a number of composition scholars have argued, too often we tend to dismiss students as apathetic when, in fact, we fail to recognize and capitalize on what does concern them. Benton cites Gerald Graff's "Hidden Intellectualism" in which Graff argues that the reason teachers face glassy-eyed students on a regular basis "is not so much that students lack the necessary fire in the belly when it comes to matters intellectual as that teachers often fail to make good use of the intellectual fires students already have going" (Benton 251). Graff's method is to get students to argue about what interests them, pointing to topics like sports, which professors have tended to underrate (27). In "Hoods in the Polis," Julie Lindquist takes Graff's challenge a step further, contending, "Engaging in argument does make you part of something. . . . Maybe we should direct our energies into exploring how argument and inquiry serve community needs, how they work to constitute publics, rather than treat argument either as the irreducible expression of social quirks or as a Habermasian route to civic truth" (268). Like Graff, Lindquist believes we should capitalize on what turns students on but not simply for the purposes of getting them engaged in argument in order to create traditional intellectuals, but rather for the sake of improving the community (creating public or Gramscian organic intellectuals). Lindquist continues, "We who teach first-year writing cannot help but make the relationship between what



happens in the university classroom and what happens in larger public domains our central concern" (269). Lindquist cites Nancy Mack, as wondering if "fake fights must be some kind of upper-class preoccupation" for practitioners of academic argument (Mack, qtd in Lindquist 269). To become passionately—and permanently—involved, students must feel that their arguments matter and they must feel equipped to effectively communicate—not to embarrass themselves, get in trouble, or be ignored.

Instructors who use the Obama campaign's recruitment strategies, coupled with best practices garnered from composition scholarship on collaborative writing, can multiply this success rate. That is, we need to crossbreed with the Obama campaign's crucial recruiting strategies to instill fervor in our students. Unlike the McCain camp, Obama's campaign targeted 17-year-olds in states like Iowa who could participate in the state caucuses—and won the primary. Instructors can target every student to become an active citizen engaged in individual and collective action. Different aspects of Obama's charisma—his persona, background, issues, vision, and style—appealed to different young volunteers. In the classroom, different causes will appeal to different students. Berry notes that story-telling was a key recruiting strategy for the field campaign: local Obama field organizers met individually with prospective volunteers and shared stories about why they were attracted to the campaign—creating instant bonding (14). In effect, my story and your story became our story:  $I + I = We$ . Likewise, teachers can hold in-class and individual conference-style brainstorming sessions to find out where students' interests and strengths lie; this is a pedagogical strategy similar to the use of generative themes that Shor has often borrowed from Freire (see *Empowering Education* and *When Students Have Power*). In the classroom, after discussing the success of a student like Colbert, we can share articles like Berry's, which details the success stories of the overall Obama campaign and the continued civic involvement of the initial volunteers. Hopefully, like Zack Exley of MoveOn.org, our students will be inspired with the Obama field campaign's "leap of faith in ordinary people" (qtd. in Berry 14).

The teacher can be the next to share her own exciting success story to build an ethos and rapport with students and, of course, encourage students to share any success stories of their own. Start small, and lead by example. For instance, Julia often shares stories of her participation in canine rescue networks, noting that she alone cannot save as many animals as she is able to by working with others. She relates the role that single and co-authored discourse plays in a multi-pronged approach to animal rescue: from recruiting brochures to animal locator websites to letters to elected officials and more. Likewise, Jennifer shares with her students the multi-pronged collective action approach taken on her campus in conjunction with the nation-wide Campus Equity Week to work to avoid the abuse and over-use of contingent faculty, relating her English department's success in converting multiple adjunct

positions into continuing lectureships with retirement and health benefits. While we discuss such traditional civic discourse strategies as employed in writing letters to editors and elected officials, we emphasize that these work best when combined with other types of collective discourse: public tabling events, town hall meetings, petitions with many signatures, round-table discussions, co-authored brochures and flyers, on so on. Because of the negative connotations often associated with the word "activism," we tend to emphasize "active citizenship" in a variety of potential local communities, and we emphasize discourse designed to bring more participants to the table, as opposed to activities that seem designed to shut folks up or out. For instance, our students seem especially predisposed to view negatively and wish to avoid anything involving "protest." Hence, students were more willing to view the activities of Campus Equity Week in a positive light when they were discussed as a "public awareness" campaign than when in a different semester, Jennifer had used the language of "protesting the abuse and overuse of contingent labor." Students tend to resist taking on the subjectivity of "activist," but are much more willing to think of themselves as responsible citizens effecting positive change on a local level.

Like the Obama youth organizers, we can target every student by asking for success stories from their home communities. Once students have a taste of success in the public sphere, ideally, they'll want more. As Berry notes, this is in fact what happened with the Obama volunteers: "In interviews with thirty young people around the country who worked on the Obama field campaign, almost all said that they continued their activism well after the endorphins of winning wore off" (13). Others went on to work in non-profit, while some returned to college and yet others are currently unemployed; still, most have had some continued engagement with the public in varying fashions.

One safe and fairly traditional academic approach is to assign students to research and share collective action success stories. This can be done as a stand alone assignment, but ideally it will serve as a pre-cursor to a collaborative project in which the students will actually communicate with a campus or other local mini-public. In her English 300: Intermediate Rhetoric and Composition course, for example, Jennifer assigns students to conduct and write up an "Analysis of a Mini-Public" (see Appendix A). The assignment, itself, was inspired by Weisser's call for compositionists to "highlight the ways in which material forces shape what gets said, who gets heard, and how these forces have structured public discourse throughout history" (98). This assignment asks students to pick a local or campus issue or organization and to investigate a range of questions concerning the current public conversations around the issue, as well as to consider possibilities for continuing the conversation and moving it toward productive action. Students must write up the answers to a series of questions around the topic, as well as advocate for a range of discourse strategies and activities

that a collaborative group might engage in with the public. Students need significant help in brainstorming for a range of issues, and we feel it useful to begin by having them identify the various communities to which they already belong or have affiliation. Instructors can ask what concerns students or their fellow community members, and what they would like to see change or improve. We feel this assignment is important for helping students understand the historical value of others' experiences with civic discourse and collective action; students need not reinvent the wheel, so to speak.

Here is where class guests are also useful. Instructors can invite local organizers from political and non-profit groups to share stories of successes and pitfalls they have encountered when working with others to enter the public sphere. It is important to invite a range of guests so that not all visitors seem clearly leftist or radical activists. Online resources, like YouTube, are also handy for watching and discussing public demonstrations and interviews. In spring 2009, Jennifer participated with her campus union in a demonstration designed to ask the public to encourage the governor to adopt national stimulus funds for higher education. Prior to the demonstration, she invited to class one of the union stewards so that he could share the multi-pronged approach the union was taking with this issue: from press releases to local news media to banners to sound bites to petitions and letters to the government. The students had time to ask questions of both the steward and their professor. Jennifer was surprised by how little the students in one of her classes knew about unions. Following the demonstration, then, the students watched in class the online clips from the news stories run by local television stations—clips that actually showed Jennifer, other professors, and students communicating with passersby and the media. Again, we assert the importance of modeling for our students our own engagement with the local public.

The first time she assigned this analysis, Jennifer required every student to complete it individually; then, she used the analytical reports as a way to brainstorm and form collaborative groups. The next time, however, Jennifer plans to have students conduct and write up this analysis collaboratively so the process more realistically mimics that way collective action works. A follow-up assignment asks students to join with like-minded peers in the class to implement a collective action project (see Appendix B). Since students are going to be much more motivated if they choose a cause that truly interests them, the class might first narrow down 4-5 projects they think worthwhile pursuing and then sign up for the topic that best fits their interests, or they might form groups and then choose a topic. (We have had success with either approach). During the campaign, Obama field organizers asked each new volunteer to commit to handling a project, something that felt empowering as a “first big responsibility” (Berry 14); volunteers weren't restricted to perceived busy work, like answering the phone or handing out flyers as happened with Kerry and McCain's campaigns. Like-



wise, the teacher will need to help groups delegate authority and responsibility. The Obama field staffers had faith that their new charges would deliver, and they essentially told their green volunteers, "The work won't get done unless you do it. Barack won't win unless you help him" (Berry 14). Classroom instructors can use this call to action, too: "Things won't change unless we work together to help change them."

As much composition scholarship on collaboration has taught us, students need guidance in learning and implementing successful collaborative skills (see Rebecca Moore Howard). Teachers must help structure collaborative assignments and put into place mechanisms that hold students individually, as well as collectively accountable. This is where we utilize the "Collaborative Contribution Self-Assessment" sheet (see Appendix C), which requires group members assess their own and their group members' contributions; while the group project will receive one grade, the self-assessments will aid the instructor in assigning individual participation grades. As with any type of collaboration—whether in class or beyond—there are always differing levels of participation and investment in the projects. In the four different classes Jennifer has used this assignment, there have been usually two groups where members have reported a couple of group members doing less than their share of the work. Because this is an issue that is likely to come up in community collaboration, we spend some time in class discussing delegation of authority and strategies for having a back-up plan should members fall ill or simply fail to perform. The groups will assign roles and tasks, give a plan and timeline to the instructor, give a presentation to the class (and periodic updates) detailing what they did and what resulted from it, and turn in a portfolio of documents created for the project. Students can investigate anything from campus bookstore price gouging to how to change the campus food choices to increasing local recycling efforts to how to recruit more participation in the campus Baptist ministry (all topics that students in our classes have, actually, investigated)—whatever genuinely, passionately interests them. Because of the latitude given by the assignment, students tend to, but not always, group up with more politically like-minded students. Conservative Christians, for instance, have felt comfortable with creating recruitment materials for the campus Baptist ministry. And, in-class brainstorming has helped them understand possible resistance to the organization that they'd want to address in their materials. In a write around activity, students list their issue or organization and their discourse goals on a sheet of paper. Other students are asked to play "devil's advocates," listing possible counterarguments or reasons to resist. So, for instance, several students wrote that campus residents may not want to go to the Baptist Center for fear of "being preached at" or "made to feel guilty." Others expressed concerns about whether non-Baptists or non-Christians would be welcomed. The Baptist ministry group, then, addressed some of these concerns in their materials. Likewise, when another group intend-

ed to address human trafficking, they were surprised at how many of their classmates felt that it was not a local issue or one of much concern for students; several wrote that it seemed a "problem out there." This provided a good opportunity to discuss how to generate interest in what might be an apathetic or resistant audience; as a result, the group decided to use a viewing of the movie *Taken*, along with statistics about human trafficking in Tennessee and Georgia, as a way to open up discussion of the topic on campus.

Our students have tended away from more risky ventures, like picketing abortion clinics or protesting immigrant labor. However, like any assignment that asks students to engage with contemporary issues, there is always the chance for students to take stances on issues that make a teacher feel uncomfortable. Here, Richard Miller's discussion in "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone" is useful for reminding us that teaching practices that shut down such politically offensive stances or treat them as fiction are not productive. Again, this pedagogy is not about steering students towards any one political persuasion so much as it is about encouraging ethical engagements in the public sphere. The mini-public analysis, along with the write around activity, help students give considerable thought to the stances of various stakeholders and to strategies that have had more or less success in the past. These pedagogical strategies, while not fool proof, tend to discourage off-the-cuff jumping into the fray of argument and encourage, instead, civil discourse.

For the students to be more successful in transmitting their messages to the public sphere, they also need to use technology and, like the feminists on the domestic violence issue, target counterpublic communities. Students can use Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, blogs, e-mail, text messaging, neighborhood or community meetings, students at other schools—however they feel they can effectively spread their message. Students can start with smaller public spheres and work their way up, and—if the students' message is compelling enough—the smaller spheres can network with each other too. To avoid disappointment, the students must target the right segment(s) of the public or counterpublic—people who should favorably respond to the students' message, for as Weisser writes, "Public writing consists of more than expressing your opinion about a current topic; it entails being able to make your voice heard on an issue that directly confronts or influences you" (94). In her *Nation* article, Berry cites Professor Peter Dreier "who teaches community organizing at Occidental College and trained Obama campaign workers, [as saying] that the key change from previous presidential elections is the difference between marketing a product and activating a community. 'This campaign was about building relationships among people that last beyond election day'" (14). A politically-active community is an ongoing, sustained effort based on relationships and dialogue among individuals, groups, publics, and counterpublics. For the field campaign, that relationship building started first amongst field organizers, who

"an ongoing, sustained effort based on relationships and dialogue among individuals, groups, publics, and counterpublics"

built welcoming offices that became hangouts for their young volunteers; networking began with the very small mini-local public of the organizers in a specific area. Likewise, successful classrooms need to be safe public spheres where students can bond over their collective action projects, and in-class time must be reserved for collaboration. In essence, the classroom is a campaign office for multiple campaigns. The instructor cannot simply sit back and wait for the students to complete the assign-

ments; the instructor must be a mentor, cheerleader, and coach who supports, encourages and guides the students. If the students feel their teacher is just going through the motions, chances are they will perform half-heartedly, too. Hence, the instructor must balance the classroom schedule between discussion days for rhetorical and civic strategies, collaborative work days, and peer review days where different groups can share and get feedback from each other.

The Organize for America website reminded us of the JFK campaign's timeless plea: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." The current message on BarackObama.com is, "Now is the time to meet our responsibilities to ourselves and to our children and serve a better, healthier future for generations to come. That future is within our grasp. So, let's go finish the job." Composition instructors can use this mantra to inspire their students, no matter what their political persuasion. At its core, the president's message is change, not politics.

Julia, who teaches English at a career college, which requires that she take more of a current-traditional grammar-based approach to writing instruction, offers students in her English I course the opportunity to earn extra credit when they participate in the vocabulary-building exercises available on FreeRice.com. The site, which allows users to identify the meanings of increasingly difficult vocabulary words, announces, "For each answer you get right, we donate 10 grains of rice through the UN World Food Program to help end hunger." Julia and her students have found the site addictive, yet one of her students recently expressed the concern that the rice went to feed people in distant locales, rather than people in our own home communities. Julia picked up on this comment to lead a whole-class discussion about area food banks and how the students might affiliate with them in order to take their community action local. Ideally, then, she would have invited guests from the food

bank, but the fast-paced curriculum of a six-week course did not allow for it. But, this is what we mean by starting small and working within the material restraints and conditions of our institutions. Some of us may only be able to have such extra-credit assignments and brief class discussions. Others of us may be able to assign or summarize articles like "Rogue Cops" and "The Obama Generation, Revisited" and share our own success stories with collective action. Still, others of us may be able to assign the types of analyses of civic campaigns we discuss above or even the collective action project we detail.

For the collective action project, Jennifer's students have engaged in a variety of discourses with the campus public on a range of issues and concerns: created recruitment materials for campus organizations; engaged in public awareness campaigns to help education majors recognize and address signs of child abuse (some of their materials have been borrowed by Education professors); created web sites to educate citizens about the stances of local politicians; and other challenging engagements with the campus mini-public. The one group that got the most enthused over their project and even generated the engagement of others on campus was one that addressed price gouging in campus convenience stores. Early on, group members took a list of products ranging from personal hygiene to food and school supplies and compared prices to a variety of off-campus stores, discovering that in almost every case, products were marked up 50 to even 300 percent. Then, they created a colorful tri-fold display for a tabling event in the University Center. In class, we discussed the challenge of getting passersby to actually stop and look at the chart, as well as how to motivate others to action. Based upon feedback from other groups, this group then created a price guessing game that offered free candy to passersby who guessed which store offered an item at a cheaper price. What seemed most exciting was that the tabling even garnered positive feedback and 100 signatures on a petition directed towards the campus food service. While, perhaps, none of the projects have resulted in sweeping changes, we hope the biggest change is in the students' confidence to successfully engage with others in the public.

We heed Weisser's caution that activist intellectuals should not expect sweeping changes when they and their students participate in the public sphere: "We can only hope to enable the fifty or more students we come into contact with at least once a week to become more critical of the world around them. And we cannot expect to make changes in more than a few of their lives each semester" (128). Weisser thinks that teachers are able to influence a few students each semester—a hundred or so over a teaching career—and, as a result of these students, change will happen gradually, starting at a local level in the educated middle class. However, we are enthusiastic about the current generation of students with whom we are working, and we encourage others teaching writing to take that leap of faith in their students by starting small and going for more challenging engagements with civic discourse.

## Appendix A

### Analysis of a Mini-Public

**Genre:** Analytical Report

**Length:** 2.75-4 pp. single-spaced, typed, with headers, in memo/report format

**Audience:** Fellow participants in English 300

**Due Dates:** Peer Review Feb. 23      Polished Version Due March 2

**Purpose:** In *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse*, Christian Weisser urges us to “recognize that culture, politics, and ideology shape public conversations,” and he adds, “We should highlight the ways in which material forces shape what gets said, who gets heard, and how these forces have structured public discourse throughout history” (98). Hence, Weisser advocates taking a strategic approach to civic discourse:

Such an approach will necessitate that writers research the histories of the issues they choose to address to find out how the conversations surrounding them have been shaped. At the same time, they will need to consider what is not said, whose voices have been excluded from the conversation, and how ideology has normalized certain features of public discussions they’re entering. (99)

Conducting such an analysis may help you and those with whom you will collaborate to strategically plan for more effective, rhetorically savvy discourse. It may help you to reach a wider audience and to devise ways to bring more stakeholders into the conversation.

The scope of your analysis will depend largely upon the history and complexity of the conversation you propose to enter (or to start). Conducting research will help you to create a CALL TO ACTION and a multi-pronged PLAN FOR ACTION. Later, your collaborative groups will choose from amongst plans created in this class for Portfolio2.

#### ***Formatting Considerations and Parts of the Analytical Report:***

Consider this report a public, informational document and, thus, format it so that information and various key parts are visually accessible. Headers, as well as careful use of white space, font size, bullets, numbers, visuals, etc, help readers gain quick access to different parts of your analysis. If you cite any sources, coordinate those with a Works Cited list near the end of your document.



### ***Key Questions to Research/Analyze:***

1. Who has been speaking about this issue recently and what have they been saying?
2. What is at stake? (what happens if nobody or few people act or if different actions are taken?)
3. What kinds of arguments are being made about this issue?
4. Who are the potential audiences for debating or weighing different takes on this issue? Who should care?
5. What kinds of texts does the issue/organization need?
6. Under what budget constraints will you/the organization be operating?
7. What kinds of appeals will work best with various target audiences?
8. What might be your collaborative group's role in addressing this issue?

### ***Parts of the Report:***

- Memo Header (addressed TO: English 300 Participants)
- Introduction: identify/briefly summarize the issue to be addressed and the need to address it
- Long and Short-Term Goals (headers may reflect these)
- Headers for each step/action/text you propose: explain/detail the proposed action, along with possible dates, times, locations, costs, types of text and activities, number of people involved, etc. and follow each with a short rationale.
- Conclusion: Should include a call for others to join you in action, invitation for feedback, and any contact information (director of an organization, names/addresses/phone numbers of people who will need to be contacted, your email).

### ***Other Considerations:***

To be strategic, plans need to include a variety of discourse and/or actions. Propose a combination of at least 4 (3 of which must be written) forms of discourse/action: petitions, news releases, buttons, flyers, tri-fold displays, brochures, handouts, letters, direct actions, puppet or street theatre, etc....

### Portfolio #2: Writing for Community and Civic Purposes

---

**Purpose and Audience:** This unit of our class gives you the opportunity to write for audiences beyond the academy—for the communities (local, regional, and/or national) and organizations to which you belong. Your writing may serve a variety of purposes: community building, recruiting, organizational, protest or promotion of an idea, practice, or cause, etc. Your primary audience might be restricted to members of the immediate community (as in the case of a church bulletin or organizational newsletter), or it might include a broader public (as in the case of a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine). Keeping a clear sense of purpose and primary, secondary, and even tertiary audiences in mind will help you better choose from options for tone, style, content, design, and delivery.

Communities may be geographic places, but you should think more broadly in terms of communities as groups of citizens brought together out of common interests, values, and concerns. Thus, a sorority or fraternity or other campus organization may be a community to which you belong. A church or volunteer organization may be yet another. You may be a member of a disenfranchised group. As a registered voter and literate person, you have civic responsibilities as a member of our democratic community.

For this portfolio, you must include: One set of collaboratively produced civic/community texts (2-4 writers may work together): a set of texts designed for an activist tabling event; a set of texts for a civic/community organization; a set of texts for a political campaign, etc. Remember to take a multi-pronged approach, producing/arranging for 4 or more types of action/texts (at least 3 texts). Depending upon what is needed, your group may produce even more texts.

**Design Considerations:** Keeping with our emphasis this semester on giving serious consideration to document design in order to increase the rhetorical effectiveness of the texts you produce, for each piece of writing you produce, you will want to make conscientious design choices. Sometimes, with fairly standard genres like letters to elected officials, letters to editors, and news releases, your design options are limited to following the standard organizational structure of the genre. With other texts, like flyers, tracts, brochures, bulletins, tri-fold displays, etc., you have more room for creativity in design and should, therefore, apply much of the design advice we have discussed this semester.

**What to include in your portfolio:**

- preliminary and polished versions of each text
- peer review sheets

- a writer's statement for each text, identifying: target audience(s), purpose, context in which the document would be presented or appear, and any other design features you want to call attention to; notes about the range of actions you engaged in. \*\*\*\*collaborative contribution assessments

## Appendix C

### **Collaborative Writing Contribution Assessment**

Individual's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Names of Your Team Members \_\_\_\_\_

Project Description (tell us the problem/issue/organization you designed texts to address, noting the range of texts the whole group produced):

---

---

---

---

---

Detail below all of the ways you contributed to the project:  
Brainstorming for topics and/or types of texts

---

---

---

---

---

Meeting in class with peers (tell which days and what you did in class on that day)

---

---

---

---

Meeting outside of class with peers (tell where you met, with whom, and what you did)

---

---

---

---

Working independently on the project (fact finding, creating preliminary drafts, sitting at a table, revising a text, securing a table....any/all things you did by yourself)

---

---

---

---

List below names of all other participants and describe each person's contributions to (or lack of contributions to) the project:

1) 

---

---

---

---

2) 

---

---

---

---

3) 

---

---

---

---

4) 

---

---

---

---

## Works Cited

- Benton, Steve. "Concealed Commitment." *Pedagogy*. 1.2. (2001): 251-259.
- Berry, Elizabeth Mendez. "The Obama Generation, Revisited." *The Nation*. 23 Nov., 2009. 13-19.
- Butler, Paul. "Style and the Public Intellectual: Rethinking Composition in the Public Sphere." JAC: *Journal of Advanced Composition* 28.1/2 (2008): 55-84.
- DeLuca, Kevin Michael and Jennifer Peeples. "From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the 'Violence' of Seattle." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 19.2 (2002): 125-151.
- Finn, Patrick J. *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest*. New York: SUNY P, 1999.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Craig Calhoun. Cambridge: MIT P, 1996. 109-42. FreeRice.com. 5 December 2009. <http://freerice.com>.
- Graff, Gerald. "Hidden Intellectualism." *Pedagogy* 1.1 (2001): 21-36.
- Hidalgo, Alexandra. "Group Work and Autonomy: Empowering the Working-Class Student." *Open Words* 2.2 (2008): 3-23.
- Howard, Rebecca Moore. "Collaborative Pedagogy." *Composition Pedagogies: A Bibliographic Guide*. Ed. Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper, and Kurt Schick. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 54-70.
- Lindquist, Julie. "Hoods in the Polis." *Pedagogy* 1.2 (2001): 261-74.
- Miller, Richard E. "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone." *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Ed. Janice M. Wolff. Urbana: NCTE, 2002. 121-46.
- Organizing for America*. 24 November 2009. <http://www.barackobama.com>.
- Shor, Ira. *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- . *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.
- Weisser, Christian R. *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.
- Wells, Susan. "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?" *College Composition and Communication*. 47.3 (1996): 325-41.





**Jennifer Beech** is associate professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. With teaching and research interests in working-class rhetorics and critical pedagogies, she co-chairs the Working-Class Culture and Pedagogy Special Interest Group for the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Her research has appeared in several edited collections and in such journals as *College English*, *JAC*, *Pedagogy*, and the *IWCA Update*.



**Julia Anderson** teaches developmental English and professional writing at Chattanooga College. For the past seven years, she had been heavily involved in animal rescue, fostering, transporting, and re-homing dogs, cats, and the occasional rabbit. (Gizmo, also pictured here, was one such animal rescued after being left for dead in an animal shelter following an attack from a large dog.) Recently, she has volunteered grant writing and tutoring services for Northside Neighborhood House, a non-profit dedicated to educating and assisting people in need in the Chattanooga area.