

December 2011

Review of Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Civic Engagement by Linda Flower

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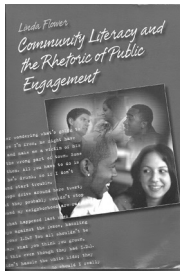
Taylor, Tim, "Review of Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Civic Engagement by Linda Flower" (2011). *Faculty Research & Creative Activity*. 25.

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Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement

by Linda Flower. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 281 pp.



By now, service-learning has become quite visible on many college campuses. With the “writing *about* the community” and the “writing *for* the community”

models of service-learning being prominent in higher education (Deans 16), Linda Flower, in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, offers a study of and an argument for the “writing *with* the community” model (110). In this theoretically and pedagogically rich book, Flower provides examples, tactics, strategies, and challenges from her and colleagues’ work in the Community Literacy Center (CLC) in Pittsburgh’s Northside neighborhood. Because of her nuanced and well-supported argument for civic engagement being crucial to education, Flower’s book is required reading for anyone interested in fostering community literacy, developing service-learning programs, establishing community writing centers, or rethinking their teaching practices. Her book

will make writing instructors, especially practitioners at two-year colleges where there are strong connections to surrounding communities, rethink how service-learning works on their campuses and also reconsider how they structure their writing courses.

The text’s concrete examples of how academia can work productively with a community to create “transformed discourse” (228) provide a tenable vision of how colleges should collaborate with community members in a way that develops the rhetorical agency of both individuals and groups within those communities. As Flower states at the close of chapter 3, “Images of Engagement in Composition Studies,” the work at the CLC has influenced and should influence how we teach writing in the future: “The two-way street between the university and community and between research and social action helped shape both a social cognitive theory of writing and a working theory of personal and public performance within a local intercultural public” (99). Flower’s argument and the CLC’s work are situated to move us to a model of civic literacy that places college professionals and community members in sustainable partnerships, productive dialogues based on rhetorical needs to create change at the local

level. In addition, in the book's final chapter, "Intercultural Inquiry: A Brief Guide," Flower provides classroom activities and writing assignments that not only would connect to service-learning initiatives but also would make writing instructors transform their approaches in the classroom.

The ten chapters of the book are organized into three parts: 1) "A Community/University Collaboration," 2) "Theoretical Frameworks and Working Theories," and 3) "Rhetorical Tools in the Rhetoric of Making a Difference." From the outset, Flower grounds her project and the Community Literacy Center in the philosophical pragmatism of John Dewey and Cornel West to foster a "transformational personal and public practice married to an insistently experimental attitude that locate[s] meaning not in abstraction but outcomes" (5). As she states clearly, "This is a book about social engagement and personal agency expressed in an experiment in local public rhetoric. It asks, How does one fashion a rhetoric of making a difference within an intercultural community?" (9). In major portions of the text, she details how university professionals and students engage with local residents—mainly urban teens on Pittsburgh's Northside—to work on varied writing and speaking projects. She argues for colleges and local neighborhoods to collaborate on literacy projects within communities in order to create change and teach young adults how to argue forcefully and respectfully about concerns they have, issues that do not surface from a course syllabus but from immediate needs in the community. Flower's work

makes readers see that community literacy should not be defined merely as voting and knowing what's happening in a local area. Instead, her examples and her argument call for a "rhetoric of engagement" (75) because, as she relates, "[c]ommunity literacy makes a distinctive contribution to our thinking about agency and rhetoric by demonstrating that rhetorical agency can be the work of *everyday people*" (206; emphasis in original).

While the book sketches a theoretically sound foundation of why literacy practices need to be embedded within communities, those who want clear "outcomes" will be pleased to see that based on assessment measures, urban teens who participated in CLC activities saw literacy practices and strategies transferring to their schoolwork and other parts of their lives. As Flower notes, "on average 80% of the teens are able to cite a specific, codable instance of literate strategies transferring to school, home, social experience, and life planning" (149). The work of the CLC also clearly introduced ideas, concepts, and rhetorical practices that support teens' literacy challenges in schools while also providing "a new sense of responsibility," showing "option[s] to resist social pressure," and nurturing "a strong sense of community" (149). Clearly, there are important educational payoffs for enterprises like the CLC. And those interested in establishing community writing centers, such as ones at Salt Lake Community College and other institutions, could enact similar strategies, approaches, and programs that the CLC uses. Whether readers want to establish a CLC-like entity or

whether they want to develop existing structures or programs (writing centers, continuing education, etc.), the work of Flower and her colleagues provides usable material for revising rhetorical practices.

Flower's fine work provides a strong example of how teacher-scholars can fully realize the "writing *with* the community" approach to service-learning. In this impressive book, Flower crystallizes and distills diverse theoretical influences, such as the Sophists, Isocrates, Dewey, and Burke, to name a handful, and presents the productive work of the CLC to show a "*working theory* of community literacy that could support socially engaged, collaborative rhetorical action, on the one hand, and the developing metacognitive, problem-solving awareness of individual writers, on the other" (95; emphasis in original). The CLC's work and Flower's argument exemplify a rhetoric of doing, a rhetoric of public engagement that is particularly relevant to colleges that are strongly connected to their surrounding communities.

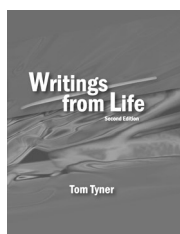
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Writings from Life, 2nd ed.

by Tom Tyner. Clovis: Breadan, 2009



As indicated by the title, Tom Tyner's second edition of *Writings from Life* discusses the craft of writing in an appropriate context for the developmental writer.

Focusing on process rather than specific types of writing, the book's chapters range thematically from "Influences" to "Beliefs and Values," to "Problems and Solutions," granting basic writers the opportunity to reflect upon and analyze important issues and experiences that characterize their lives. While Tyner adheres to a traditional four-phase process progressing from prewriting to drafting and revising, his navigation through that process emphasizes the individual writer's strengths and the ability to recognize and remedy common writing missteps. Student writers are guided through each piece with initial discussions of topic selection and brainstorming activity giving way to drafting and finalizing the essay, with particular attention to audience analysis, word choice, and organization.

Importantly, the text distinguishes revision from editing, echoing Mina Shaugnessy's observations on student error. Correctness is not taught through random lessons in punctuation and sentence structure, but through extension of the student's relevant revisions of each assignment. The first chapter, for instance, provides an overview of both the writing process and paragraph