

Book Reviews

Composition Studies, Public-Facing Activism, and Our Continued Social Turn: A Review Essay

Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication, by Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young, editors. WAC Clearinghouse/University Press of Colorado, 2017. 258 pages.

Writing for Engagement: Responsive Practice for Social Action, by Mary P. Sheridan, Megan J. Bardolph, Megan Faver Hartline, and Drew Holladay, editors. Lexington Books, 2018. 315 pages.

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One of the articles I read while teaching at a two-year college and before taking the plunge into a PhD program was Patricia Bizzell's "Composition Studies Saves the World!" The article captured an emerging personal ethos for me as I taught in a large Midwestern community college. It is worth rereading: Bizzell's lively voice, showing that serious academic argument need not be stuffy, her arguments themselves—taking on Stanley Fish and his pronouncements about what writing studies folk ought to teach and how we ought to do it, and her own vision about the possibilities of our discipline and profession—inspired me. Bizzell details an incisive timeline of how social justice came to be embedded in our field. In the 1980s, rhetoric and composition was coalescing as a discipline; practitioners and scholars were trying to figure out how to teach writing to the "new" students entering composition classrooms—students who were more diverse in terms of class, ethnicity, and race. Bizzell recounts that she and other teacher-scholars at the time were trying to meet students where they were—not to merely flunk them out for entering postsecondary study without the necessary language, dialects, and discourses already learned. These teachers weren't "bent on saving the world," but teaching writing to all students meant learning to address their needs (174).

Her timeline moves quickly through basic writing, various cognitive and psycholinguistic methods, the nascent academic discourse movement, and her encounter with Paulo Freire's work. Bizzell points out that this work wasn't perfect, nor was it a panacea for all students. However, she asserts, "if you believe that the inequities induced by racism, sexism, and economic exploitation should be ameliorated, then I think you would have to agree that this composition research, while perhaps not saving the world, did indeed contribute to making it a better place" (177-78). I read this article as a call to action, and it let

me know others were out there thinking along similar lines. Almost 30 years after Bizzell's article, this history undergirds my own work as a teacher-scholar-activist. Further, her work, in my estimation, provides context and rhetorically frames the work of writing studies as rightfully activist and hopeful.

Two recent edited collections, Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young's *Performing Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, Communication* and Mary P. Sheridan, Megan J. Bardolph, Megan Faver Hartline, and Drew Holladay's *Writing for Engagement: Responsive Practice for Social Action*, are significant contributions to the arc of rhetoric and composition's social turn, which I see situated in teacher-scholar-activism. These collections, like Bizzell's article, provide a blueprint for the teacher-scholar-activism our profession and discipline ought to do. I deploy the phrase "teacher-scholar-activist" deliberately. Patrick Sullivan, in his 2015 article, "The Two-Year College Teacher-Scholar-Activist," asks two-year college English teachers to acknowledge that part of our professional identity is an activist identity—that we must "accep[t] and embrac[e] the revolutionary and inescapably political nature of our work" (327). In another article, "Meet My English 93 Class," Sullivan argues for using "public-facing activism" and for adding the voices of our students to these conversations to directly address inequitable power structures. And while Sullivan discusses the two-year college and basic writing, I extrapolate the teacher-scholar-activist identity to work across institution types. These collections operate from a similar sense of exigency and purpose. In his acknowledgements page, Young makes clear his, and by proxy the collection's, commitment to teacher-scholar-activism when he writes that he and co-editor Condon "recognize that the work we do in academic institutions will either perpetuate the status quo built on legacies of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class domination (to name an obvious few), or intervene" (ix). Like Bizzell in the 1980s, Young, Condon, and others are working to open opportunities for students and communities through writing studies. Their challenge to embrace antiracism in classrooms and communities, a challenge that Condon sees as having no "finish line," is just and intrinsic to the work of writing studies (x).

Condon and Young's collection is divided into three sections: "Actionable Commitments," "Identity Matters," and "In the Classroom." Several chapters stand out. For example, Rashab Diab, Beth Godbee, and Thomas Ferrell's thought-provoking chapter, "Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable," argues that enacting an "everyday educational process toward rational justice" is a means to work "against the macro-logics of oppression" (37). For the authors, this work is both "self-work and work-with-others." (37). The self-work they suggest is well-framed, calling on writing studies practitioners to look at values, emotions, relations, and conditions (27). This frame is useful for interrogating teacher-scholar practices and motivations and for creating a

process for undertaking this work. Interestingly, they note that this work might only seem to have a local impact, but that over time its effect will spread. The notion of localism is significant in their chapter as the work in the classroom and the labor to enact personal change as teacher-scholar-activists working toward anti-racist pedagogies and consciousness is always and explicitly local. For the authors, the end outcome of this effort is “creating new realities that are more racially and socially just” (37). This commitment is moral and laudable, and it fits squarely within the context and history of the social turn of rhetoric and composition and with the focus on engagement in Sheridan et. al.’s book, too.

Perhaps my favorite chapter in Condon and Young’s collection is Calvin Logue’s “Teaching African American Discourse: A Lesson of a Recovering Segregationist.” I appreciate bravery in academic writing, and this essay is brave because it examines his unexamined and unconscious acceptance of segregation and race privilege. Logue expertly relates the narrative of his experience in Birmingham on the day of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963. His lived experience in that moment—noting that he and his children were safe, but that other children weren’t—is stunning. The author’s examples from his childhood in the South, his time in the military, and his own growing consciousness are examples of the power of narrative and its legitimacy as a methodology. Logue’s history of his own segregationist past is haunting in that it is so plausible for human beings to let everyday injustices pass by without remark. His essay gives a terrible life to white supremacist structures.

Mya Poe’s chapter, “Reframing Race in Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum,” envisions interdisciplinary collaboration as a kind of activism. A compelling thesis, she argues that writing studies needs to “anticipate . . . moments where race and writing come together across the curriculum and share ways of working through these moments as we work with faculty and teaching assistants in helping them design, deliver, and assess writing” (88). Poe goes on to note research where WAC “scholars may worry about being perceived as foregrounding the values of composition studies over those of other disciplines” (88). Again, like others in these two collections, Poe turns to the local. In this way, she posits teacher-scholar-activist WAC work that feels sorely needed. She argues that by using specific student contexts, we “can move past generalizations about ‘international students,’ ‘basic writers,’ or ‘transfer students’” (94). As a practitioner in a two-year college, I found that her argument resonates deeply. These labels often represent ways of othering and eventually getting rid of students—a process described in Burton Clark’s landmark essay, “The ‘Cooling Out’ Function in Higher Education,” and still relevant now, as evidenced in low completion numbers, especially for minority students. I agree with Poe that “integrating race into WAC practice has the potential to address very real teaching problems,” and that this work should

be grounded locally and in relation to specific students. This chapter provides essential theoretical grounding for future WAC work.

Condon and Young's introduction is a site of richness in this collection, too. They argue, "understanding that racism exists and operates beyond the academy is foundational" (4). The editors continue, "as powerful as the collective desire of Americans may be to achieve a post-racial democracy, we have not arrived. The necessity of acknowledging and resisting the historical force of racism by teaching about racism and by developing pedagogical approaches that enact and model antiracist engagement remains pressing" (10). Democracy is not possible when a rhetorical sleight of hand signaling a non-existent equality covers the silencing of many. Young and Condon's book exemplifies teacher-scholar-activism through its engagement with persistent barriers to democracy.

Mary P. Sheridan and her co-editors approach teacher-scholar-activist work from a different frame than the authors in Condon and Young's collection. In the introduction, Sheridan writes that this text addresses "more expansive understandings of where, how, and with whom we research," all toward the end of "connecting academia to the broader society" (xi). The collection's aim is teacher-scholar-activism that asserts a rhetoric of engagement—public engagement as the way we enact the social turn—as the work of writing studies. Sheridan herself takes up this idea, arguing that "engagement is one way we have embraced the implications the social turn has had on our knowledge-making practices and on how we can responsively act and learn" (xiii). The collection, which grew out of the 2014 Thomas R. Watson Conference, features eighteen short chapters that examine engagement and the ethical responsibilities it entails.

The volume's chapters are divided into three sections. The first, "Taking Positions," includes chapters about setting up public-facing activism and institution-facing activism. The first chapter, Linda Adler-Kassner's "Taking Action in the Age of Reaction: Constructing Architectures of Participation," argues that we must begin with "foundations in our position-taking" as precursor to taking broader strategic action (5). For Adler-Kassner engagement arises from what I would call located agency—what she describes as "the result of individuals working together to create and enact strategy" (6). Adler-Kassner is aware that collective engagement is difficult, especially in light of the Education Intelligence Complex. This thinking resonates with the Condon and Young collection, which theorizes and reports tactics and strategies that resist white supremacist ideologies underlying educational and societal structures. Adler-Kassner's metaphor of constructing an architecture is useful. Resilient design theory is a branch of architecture that deals with how physical structures stand up to environmental stressors. The application of this metaphor asks us

to interrogate the structures we build in writing studies to ensure that they are strategic action for a more just, engaged and equitable future.

The second section of the book, “Building Relationships,” moves from the foundation- setting of the first section into lived extant practices. One of the chapters that stands out is Steven Alvarez’s “Practicing Confianza: Engaged Community Literacy Learning Research in Mexington, Kentucky.” Confianza literally translates to “trust,” but it has a deeper connotation of mutual reciprocity. Alvarez’s concentration on this term and its cultural weight is a necessary contribution to community literacy work, especially the kinds of engagement, teacher-scholar-activism, and located agency to which the social turn points us. Alvarez writes that “confianza in this frame counters precarious distrust and leads to research and dialogues as sites for forming community trust and for collaborative engaged learning” (141). The care and respect Alvarez shows as he works with high school Latinx students is worth calling attention to as a practice. He notes that his approach takes time, which itself is a kind of resistance to neoliberal logics of efficiency. As I read, I felt this text and the literacy work it describes to be kindred with Freire’s early critical literacy program in Brazil in that it is deeply invested in serving and listening to communities.

The final section of Sheridan et. al.’s collection is “Crossing Boundaries,” including activism and teaching that happens outside of traditional classroom context. Stand outs are Steve Parks’ chapter on community publishing in Palestine, Patrick W. Berry’s chapter on teaching in prisons, and Stephanie Rae Larson’s chapter on refugee literacy learning and the complex ideologies of literacy and not-for-profit organizations. This section is the strongest in the book because of the front-facing activism each of the chapters detail. Parks’ “Writing, Democracy, Activism” details a community effort to publish a book called *Revolution by Love* in the middle of the ongoing Israeli Palestinian conflict. That the book was distributed at all “was seen as significant,” Parks reported (189). He goes on to say that this work is a small example of how “writing can, perhaps, give voice to democratic activists in small but important ways” (189). Parks’ chapter has value for me, not because I have worked in conflicted and dangerous situations like this, but because he tells us that he began his essay “with the dream of a moral compass” that would help teacher-scholar-activists as we step outside of our classrooms (194). He calls his work a failure. I’m not sure I agree, but I know well the feeling of failure in undertaking work to challenge structural inequalities, injustices, and violence. It is a powerful, emotionally touching chapter. In reflecting on the section title “Boundaries Crossed,” I’m not sure this is the best name for this part of the book. I would argue instead that these chapters are the actionable commitments Condon and Young talk about in their collection, albeit focused on the public commitments of scholarship rather than explicit antiracist action.

Perhaps not all readers will see—or agree with—the connections I’ve made here. Condon and Young in their introduction tell us that “for as long as [they] have been thinking, talking, working at antiracist activism within and beyond the bounds of the academy, [they] have encountered denials and scapegoating for the most blatant racist incidents. . . . We have been asked to justify that work—to explain to our colleagues, our students, and our readers why such work is necessary,” even though the answers seemed “commonsensical” to them (3). Their observation demonstrates ubiquitous resistance to anti-racist work and to labor for social change more generally. These two collections are part of a larger movement toward explicit teacher-scholar-activist work. Writing studies practitioners are taking up the moral obligations of making the world a more just and equitable place. Both collections are examples of front-facing activism.

Condon and Young conclude *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy* with a call to action, writing:

We call on our readers and our disciplines to join with students in a multiracial antiracist struggle for justice. Let us demand of ourselves and encourage one another to do more than mouth our commitments: to make our actions match our words; to transform our classrooms, our departments, and our institutions as well as our communities; and to learn from one another as allies who possess the courage to effect change. (230)

Sheridan makes a similar claim at the end of her introduction to *Writing for Engagement*, telling readers that her chapters “share stances that make demands upon us all, that call for us to advocate for policies and practices [...] to develop a more encompassing understanding of who we are responsible to and for in our teaching and research” (xx). This signals to me a return to Bizzell, who posits three ways that composition studies changes the world in her essay—one, by doing the “proper work of teaching writing”; two, by assigning materials that raise students’ awareness; and three, by having students encounter professors’ “personality and values” (185-86). These two collections together form a fourth way—we join the struggle, or, as Condon puts it in an earlier book of hers, we join the band. We take on the political nature of the work of the social turn and become engaged teacher-scholar-activists. To use Adler-Kassner’s metaphor, these two collections are architectural plans for how we might engage in this work.

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Works Cited

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