From the Contact Zone to the City: Iris Marion Young and Composition Theory

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One of the most pressing questions now occupying scholars in rhetoric and composition involves defining the relationship between the writing classroom and public discourse. While scholars in our field have long embraced the idea that the college composition course is an important site for shaping students’ responses to cultural institutions and value systems, we have until recently imagined an uncomplicated relation between the classroom and public sphere—we have sometimes operated as though whatever critical political acumen students develop in the classroom automatically transfers to their lives outside the university. In the words of literary theorist Evan Watkins, scholars and teachers have too frequently equated “what circulates within English departments” with what “circulates from” them (66).

Unfortunately, these two processes are not equivalent: even if students become proficient critics of political and social discourse within the context of particular school assignments, there is little evidence to show whether and how they export this awareness to other public arenas. Susan Wells notes that while rhetorical scholars talk a great deal about their commitment to teaching students to write about public topics, we have not adequately theorized exactly what we mean by “public” discourse and how our courses might help students to enter it:

We do not do justice to . . . this set of possibilities [inherent in a public, political teaching mission] when we assign students generic public writing, such as an essay on gun control, or a letter to a nonexistent editor. In such assignments, students inscribe their positions in a vacuum: since there is no place within the culture where student writing on gun control is held to be of general interest, no matter how persuasive the students, or how intimate their acquaintance with guns, “public writing” in such a context means “writing to no audience at all” . . . . The space within which . . . public writing might be read, and therefore the incitement to read it, must be constructed. (328)
What Wells calls for is a more theoretically rich model that answers questions like these: What kind of public space is the writing classroom? What kind should it be? How does the discourse produced in a writing classroom connect with other public and private forums? How do particular teaching practices shape the classroom’s relationship to the public? In this essay, I’d like to propose that feminist political theorist Iris Marion Young’s notion of the ideal city, developed in her 1990 book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, can serve as such a model. Because it combines a normative ideal with explicitly pragmatic, administrative recommendations, Young’s urban model supplements in potentially fruitful ways the prevailing metaphors rhetorical scholars now draw on when we talk about the public dimensions of our work.

**Young’s Urban Public Sphere**

Young’s 1990 book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* articulates an ideal urban model of the public sphere as part of a larger normative project: she aims to broaden political theories of justice to encompass the concerns of postmodern social theories. For Young, examining how public spaces and public discourse operate is fundamental to this project, because such arenas are the primary loci where justice gets defined and enacted. However, she argues, modern theories of justice have failed to respond to the key insights of postmodern theory because they continue to rely on a reductive way of thinking about public life, a paradigm she calls “distributive logic.” This distributive logic, typified in liberal individualist theories like John Rawls’ social-contract theory, presume that human beings are primarily consumers, and that public policy discussions center around “what individual persons have, how much they have, and how that amount compared with what other individuals have” (25). Even theories like Jurgen Habermas’s communicative ethics, which purport to focus more on social processes than on discrete goods, she notes, share this focus on the individual as the locus of justice. This emphasis on the individual, Young argues, implies a “social atomism” that ignores the differences in positionality created by individuals’ membership in particular groups; it fails to recognize that groups in fact constitute individuals’ identities (157). As a result, distributive thought emphasizes generalizable qualities over particular ones, glossing over the needs and concerns those who do not fit in with the majority (111). As a result, she contends, this body of thought neglects issues of difference central to postmodern theories.

Second, Young argues, in the consumer orientation of distributive thought, questions about the fair allocation of goods to individuals are foregrounded, overshadowing questions about the larger, institutional and social contexts that determine what actually gets distributed and why. Even when scholars try to incorporate such concerns into a
distributive schema, the result is conceptual confusion, since ideas like power, decision-making, policy, and rights are better perceived as processes than as "some kind of stuff that can be traded, exchanged, and distributed" to individuals (31). Distributive political theories thus assume that the processes that determine political outcomes, the historical and institutional considerations that enable them, and their differential effects upon groups of people are unworthy of consideration (28). And in so doing, they overlook the central institutional and procedural concerns of postmodern theories.¹

Even communitarian theorists, who in recent years have criticized traditional liberalism's preoccupation with individual rights and who advocate a political ethic based upon group and community responsibility, fail in Young's eyes. For despite their avowed concern with public and social structures, they rely on exactly the same kind of distributive logic. Communitarian theories, rather than addressing the cultural heterogeneity and fragmentation that characterize contemporary life, instead rely upon a "wildly utopian" ideal of public deliberation centered in small, homogeneous communities wherein individuals interact face to face (233). Worse, because it explicitly values mutual identification and consensus over other democratic values, this community ideal unwittingly "validates and reinforces the fear and aversion some social groups exhibit towards others" (235). In short, because it posits a model of community in which essentially similar individuals assume that they understand others in much the same way as they understand themselves, communitarian theory eludes the difficult questions involved in creating a participatory model that can encompass the needs of diverse groups (231). Young concludes that while liberal individualism and communitarianism may seem to represent opposite poles on the political spectrum, neither adequately incorporates the insights of postmodern social theories because both grow from the same, underlying distributive paradigm. Thus, these two approaches should not be viewed as the only philosophical alternatives available to those interested in social justice and democratic deliberation. Instead, Young offers an alternative model.

Young's urban ideal rejects both liberalism's isolated individual and the communitarian ideal of small, homogeneous communities as the locus of public decision-making: On the contrary, she argues that at their best, contemporary cities comprise ideal forums for implementing a nondistributive ethics, because people in urban areas more often interact with diverse others and value such interactions. In cities, complex networks of production, distribution, transportation, exchange, entertainment, and communication are coordinated across a wide, diverse geographic area. At the same time, individuals retain connections to multiple groups, some of which are small and homogeneous,
and others comprised mainly of strangers. The play of identification and difference is thus continually present, yet continually shifting (238). Unlike small, insulated communities, Young shows, urban life is characterized by four unique dynamics conducive to democratic justice:

1. **Social differentiation without exclusion**; that is, heterogeneous social groups can exist side by side, since deviant and disenfranchised groups can find in the city both the “critical mass” and the “cover of anonymity” that allows them to organize (238).

2. **Varied use of public space**, such that parks, neighborhoods, and business complexes serve several purposes, sometimes simultaneously. These spaces “draw people out in public to them, give people pleasure [because of] the diversity of activities they support” (239).

3. **Eroticism**, which Young defines as “the pleasure and excitement of being drawn out of one’s secure routine to encounter the novel, strange and surprising” (239). This kind of pleasure, she argues, is the opposite of the security and exclusion homogeneous communities promote.

4. **Publicity**, or spaces open to everyone, where anyone can participate in ongoing activities and discussion. In such places, Young contends, “one always risks encounter with those who are different, those who identify with different groups and have different opinions of different forms of life”—yet one is not obliged to assimilate those differences, just to acknowledge them (240).

Because cities by their nature incorporate these features, she explains, social justice and ethical decision-making can be fostered when those in power enact social policies that capitalize on these democratizing potentialities. Young does not deny, however, that widespread injustice and exclusion exist in urban areas. In the US, she laments, “many large cities are sites of decay, poverty, and crime” inimical to any ideal of social justice and public deliberation—modern or postmodern (241). However, she believes that distributive thinking has helped to perpetuate the institutional structures that cause these kinds of oppression and that the urban ideal she articulates could alleviate these problems by capitalizing on cities’ democratizing features (242-243).

Young’s proposals for urban policymakers are comprehensive, ranging from zoning recommendations to suggestions for shifting governing power away from states and towards regional, urban-based areas (242-256). However, the portion of her plan most relevant for teachers of rhetoric involves her conception of public deliberation. She suggests that issues cannot be democratically discussed unless policymakers create and support public forums where debate occurs among a heterogeneous public, with specific representation given to oppressed groups (238-240). She explains:
Justice requires that each person [and each group] should have the institutionalized means to participate effectively in the decisions that affect her or his actions . . . . Agents who are empowered with a voice to discuss ends and means of collective life and who have institutionalized means of participating in those debates . . . . open together onto a set of publics where none has autonomy [to ignore the concerns of other groups, but all are empowered to speak]. (251)

Such deliberative forums, Young emphasizes, should not be governed by Habermasian norms that posit an abstract discursive ideal of rationality, universality, and impartiality. Rather, they should be more open participatory exchanges, where interlocutors feel free to recognize the particularity of their group interests and where no topic is a priori deemed irrelevant to the public interest. The sole restriction on such forums should be that no group may prevent another from participating and being heard (116). In sum, Young believes that a postmodern model of social justice and democratic public life necessitates a revised, group-based understanding of public discourse and how it operates within varied public settings.

Why Should Composition Theorists Adopt Young's Model?
My contention that Young’s notion of the ideal city can enhance composition theorists' understanding of public and classroom discourse requires fuller justification, since, with a few exceptions, scholars in our discipline have paid relatively little attention to her work. Lester Faigley mentions her work positively, saying that it gives rhetoricians a “means of thinking through the complexity of the momentarily situated subject” (239). James Kastely notes that Young's procedural understanding of group identity and of power can help rhetoricians understand key connections between rhetoric and ideology (229-233). Porter praises her contributions to postmodern ethical theory, which “recognize[s] that heterogeneity can lead to . . . . the silencing of the less powerful” (127). Recent work by Joseph Harris (132-133), Gregory Clark (63) and Dennis Lynch, et al (62) cite her emphasis on difference as a valuable counterbalance to consensus-based or interest-group-based theories of community. However, none of these scholars have elaborated a detailed account of how Young’s work might contribute to composition theory generally, which is my intention here.

One might ask: Why draw on the ideas of a political theorist rather than relying more closely on the work of theorists within English studies? And perhaps even more critically, why stretch a model like Young’s, which is intended to redefine public, political discourse, to apply to the academic discourse generated within writing classrooms? My answer to these questions is that Young’s urban model addresses dimensions of teaching that the models most recently embraced by
composition theorists neglect. In particular, the ideal city responds to key limitations in pedagogical approaches that imagine the classroom as a discourse community or as a cultural "contact zone," as the following analysis will show.

Writing Instruction and the Metaphor of Community

From the mid-1980s through the early 1990s, the most popular metaphor for explaining discursive relations within the writing classroom was the "discourse community." This metaphor developed as a reaction against previous pedagogical approaches that emphasized writing as a private activity produced in isolation by individuals, either as a means of expressing personal identity or as a "problem-solving" method that enabled them to complete functional tasks. In a movement that Rick Penticoff calls the "social turn" in composition studies, scholars like Kenneth Bruffee and David Bartholomae proposed that we conceive of the composition classroom as a small community which introduces students to the discursive codes of the larger academic world. Drawing on the literary concept of "interpretive community" and the linguistic model of "speech community," they coined the term "discourse community" to describe any mutually identified group of writers that share particular conventions of written language (Harris 101).

In his groundbreaking essay "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae argues that this "community" metaphor helps teachers to understand why so many students have difficulty couching their ideas in academic prose. It is not that they have nothing important to say, nor that they are illiterate. Rather, they simply may not recognize that academic forums require different kinds of discourse than they are accustomed to producing (Bartholomae 134). The writing classroom, according to this model, serves an initiatory function. The teacher's job is to help students make the transition from the familiar communities of home and work into membership in the unfamiliar academic one. Her responsibility to students entails "socialization to the community's ways," turning students into "native" users of the university's modes of thinking, argument, and discursive conventions (Bizzell 53). Armed with this knowledge, the student becomes able to write papers that others in the university consider reasonable and authoritative, not just in the composition course, but in other courses and forums as well.

The longstanding popularity of the discourse community metaphor is easy to understand. As Harris observes, it "demystified the concept of intention" which held that writers made meaning in flashes of inspiration, by emphasizing that "it is only through being part of some ongoing discourse that we can, as individual writers, have things like points to make and purposes to achieve" (98). In addition, it placed teacher and students in a realm of collaborative, mutually supportive
interactions that revolved around shared values and a shared purpose. Furthermore, by tying the efforts of writing teachers to the needs of a larger forum—the "academic community"—this metaphor also suggested a public value for composition instruction during a time when university programs were being pressured to justify their practical usefulness. Finally, this metaphor coalesced neatly with multicultural theories that gained popularity among scholars during the same period, because rather than declaring "illiterate" students who came from non-mainstream cultural backgrounds, it allowed teachers to see these students simply as lacking exposure to alternative linguistic models.

Its apparent concern with public dimensions of written discourse and its validation of students from diverse groups would seem to make the discourse community metaphor a viable basis for understanding the relationship between the classroom and the public sphere. However, during the past several years, critics have demonstrated that, in fact, it has many of the same conceptual shortcomings as the communitarian models Young rejects. First, as Harris notes, because discourse communities have generally been defined so abstractly, the concept bears little direct relation to actual writers and texts. Instead,

[M]ost of the "communities" to which . . . theorists refer exist at a vague remove from actual experience: The University, the Profession, The Discipline, The Academic Discourse Community. They are all quite literally utopias—nowheres, meta-communities—tied to no particular place, and thus oddly free of many of the tensions, discontinuities, and conflicts in the sorts of talk and writing that go on everyday in the classrooms and departments of an actual university. (100)

Without a firm grounding in concrete practice, he cautions, the notion of community becomes an empty, sentimentalized abstraction—made all the more seductive and dangerous because of the "nice and friendly" connotations the word carries (13). Such decontextualized idealizations of discourse processes represent exactly the kind of thinking Young warns against.

In short, the discourse community metaphor, while it raised important questions ignored by previous, individualized conceptions of writing instruction, has outlived its usefulness. For it does not go far enough in imagining how we might help students take their writing public into concrete deliberative settings, nor does it provide a way of validating ethical, political, or linguistic difference. In Rosa Eberly's words, we need a different model that draws a "fuller picture of the lived experience of teaching and learning and writing in a university" and of "the different kinds of public realms that we and our students read and write in" (3).
Writing Instruction and the Contact Zone

Scholars currently writing about political and ethical dimensions of writing instruction often invoke the image of the classroom as a "contact zone" elaborated by Mary Louise Pratt. Pratt's influential 1991 essay "Arts of the Contact Zone" provides an alternative to earlier treatments of the classroom discourse community, which implied homogeneous, consensus-based relations among teachers and students. She advises, instead, that instructors envision university classrooms as "contact zones," social spaces where diverse cultures "meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (39). Multiple uses of language, including parody, transculturation, vernacular discourses, and heterogeneity of meaning, constitute the "literate arts" of the contact zone—and socially progressive teachers must support and revel in these coexisting discourses. In direct opposition to the "discourse community" model, she opines that "the most revealing speech situation for understanding language [is] one involving a gathering of people each of whom sp[eaks] two languages and under[stands] a third and h[olds] only one language in common with any of the others": that unfamiliarity and difference, not agreement, spark the most meaningful rhetorical exchanges (38).

Pratt's model valuably draws attention to the multicultural and multivocal nature of the classroom; indeed, at several points, her description echoes features that Young values in the ideal city. And the "contact zone" metaphor has been enthusiastically received by numerous scholars, including Patricia Bizzell, who believes that it provides a persuasive postmodern rationale for reorganizing English curricula in both literature and composition. Bizzell proposes, "I am suggesting that we organize English studies not in terms of literary or chronological periods, nor essentialized racial or gender categories, but rather in terms of historically defined contact zones, moments when groups within the society contend for the power to interpret what is going on" ("Contact" 167). And, in fact, many scholars, including Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, Phyllis van Slyck, and Richard Miller have since published work describing their attempts to build courses around Pratt's ideas.

However, Pratt's approach, for all its popularity, has some key limitations as a pedagogical model; for it stops at describing difference and thus leaves open practical questions about how teachers can use their administrative authority to harness this diversity in productive ways. While she exhorts instructors to encourage and revel in conflict, she never really details how these differences are to be evoked, and what students and teachers are to do with them once they are aired within the classroom. Her essay merely acknowledges that such conflicts are likely to excite both "rage, incomprehension and pain" and "exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new
wisdom" (39). She admits near the end of her essay that she has not fully worked out what "the pedagogical arts of the contact zone" might entail and encourages other scholars to undertake this project (40). Pratt's metaphor thus stops short of addressing difficult issues of power and implementation necessary to any approach to teaching. More importantly, I will argue, it resists such applications, as subsequent attempts by other scholars to apply her insights to classroom settings show.

Most recent applications of the contact zone model, like the metaphor itself, focus on packing as many diverse perspectives into a course as possible, then having students read these in juxtaposition and analyze the rhetorical clashes among them. Difference, in a class organized as a "contact zone," is generally introduced through readings that document responses to particular, historical or cultural struggles. Phyllis van Slyck, for instance, has designed several team-taught, interdisciplinary courses that feature thematic "clusters" of World Literature texts. Students read novels, stories, and poems representing divergent views on a particular issue, such as "Gender Issues" or "Culture and Communication." She contends that in their reading, "students come to see that the literary text . . . is a site where an important kind of cultural debate and dialogue can take place, that it is a space in which complex feelings and attitudes on different sides of a question are dramatized" (167). The readings are paired with writing assignments that ask students to address such questions as "How have you been culturally defined and stereotyped by others?" and "How can we recognize and overcome stereotypes?" (164). As students use these questions to reflect on their reading, van Slyck believes, they better understand their own cultural positionalities and become aware that all social and political values are socially constructed (167).

Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg have developed an even more comprehensive application of Pratt's model. Their recent textbook Negotiating Difference constructs a writing course based upon a collection of varied public documents from six periods in US history that they believe constitute cultural "contact zones." Each of the six units includes writing from a variety of genres (legal documents like treaties, deeds, and court decisions, as well as less specialized forms of public discourse like opinion pieces, speeches, and narratives) representing a variety of groups and views. For instance, the unit on "The Debate over Slavery and the Declaration of Independence" features excerpts from Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia, Frederick Douglass's speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" manumission records, and papers by proslavery advocates George Fitzhugh and David Christy, among other documents (174-238). Through careful study, discussion, and written responses to such texts, Bizzell and Herzberg argue, students move towards two important kinds of understanding: first, they
see that “difference and dissent have been significant in American life in the past, [and] also that movements toward greater social equality and toleration of difference have sometimes met with success” (Bizzell, *Academic* 293). Second, they become familiar with the rhetorical strategies writers employ when attempting to persuade others in various public arenas (Bizzell and Herzberg, *Negotiating* 1). The rhetorical acumen students acquire in examining these historical episodes, these authors hope, will “enrich [their] own rhetorical resources” and inspire them to address contemporary conflicts in their own communities (*Negotiating* 2).

While I believe that both van Slyck and Bizzell and Herzberg’s approaches illustrate some fundamental problems inherent in the contact zone model, I first want to make it clear that I admire their work. Both clearly seek to involve students in negotiating difficult issues, and both have compiled impressive materials that allow students to engage with such conflicts. Both approaches build in opportunities for students to identify with particular positions as well as to critique them. Finally, both attempt to connect their course materials to discursive spheres outside the classroom—van Slyck to individual students’ value systems, and Bizzell and Herzberg to the shared “cultural archive” that constitutes US history. Thus, their work has much to offer teachers interested both in introducing students to conflict and in connecting their pedagogy to wider public purposes.

However, these approaches also illustrate the problem I raise earlier: the contact zone model, because its focus is showcasing as many different perspectives as possible, tends to emphasize reading and critical analysis at the expense of encouraging students to articulate their own responses to issues. In Van Slyck’s case, “negotiating difference” involves having students read a bunch of culturally unfamiliar texts and talk about how much these differ from the values they learned at home. We never see this same critical perspective turned outward, to ask students to consider how their reading and experience might bear on others’ readings and experiences, or on related issues outside the classroom. In Bizzell and Herzberg’s case, students spend their time analyzing historically distant events, and while such analysis may indeed inspire interest in talking about varied responses to related contemporary events, this possibility is not a primary focus of the course. In fact, the authors say that they focus on distant history purposefully, because “it tends to defuse or desensitize the controversies somewhat” (*Negotiating* 5). There’s certainly nothing wrong with concentrating students’ rhetorical energies on literary and historical texts—these are educationally valuable activities. However, these texts, and the supporting curricular materials, do not directly engage students in shaping the outcome of any particular debate, nor do they connect in an explicit way to contemporary public conflicts.
In fact, as Richard E. Miller has observed, the tendency of "contact zone" pedagogy to focus on readings of culturally or historically distant texts can leave teachers unprepared when more immediate kinds of discursive conflict arise in their classrooms. He cites a well-publicized incident in which an instructor received, in response to a description/analysis essay assignment, a virulently homophobic student narrative recounting an evening during which the writer and several friends threatened a man they perceived as gay and savagely attacked a homeless man (393-394). The student's instructor faced a wrenching dilemma: Should he treat the paper as a factual account and contact appropriate authorities, thus silencing the "different" perspective it staked out? Should he ignore the content and assign a grade based only upon the formal qualities of the paper? Should he refuse to accept the paper on the grounds that hate speech is inappropriate in a college classroom and direct the student to write a more moderate text? Should he make the paper the center of a class discussion examining the rhetorical and ethical issues it raised? Miller's point is that the "contact zone" model provides no guidance for teachers who encounter such dilemmas. Pratt exhorts us to "revel in difference," which works fine as long as the differences expressed occur within texts we can distance ourselves from. But when ethical clashes are more personal, immediate, and potentially hurtful, the idea of a "contact zone" sheds little light on what the teacher's responsibilities as initiator and monitor of those differences might be. Miller warns, this approach to teaching "never gets around to the business of discussing how to produce a 'real, substantive response' to the kind of unsolicited oppositional discourse discussed here. Since this is uncharted territory, it is not surprising that we often find ourselves at a loss, not knowing what to do, where to go, or what to say once we cross this line" (395).

The contact zone is a geographical metaphor; it imagines the classroom as a particular kind of space where the boundaries between diverse discourses intermingle. However, to know the topography of a place does not necessarily enable one to transverse it: to believe that conflict characterizes the classroom does not tell us how best to deal with it. And, unfortunately, dealing with it is the responsibility of teachers, who hold institutional power over the students enrolled in their courses. We cannot abdicate this responsibility by putting it aside to observe or passively "celebrate" the existence of classroom conflicts—especially when the conflicts are ones we ourselves have orchestrated. Pratt's model, for all its value, needs to be extended via new theoretical constructs that give us some idea of how to manage power while still allowing diverse participation. In Miller's words, we need to be able to imagine a specifically "pedagogical response [that] lies ... in closely attending to what our students say and write in an ongoing
effort to learn how to read, understand, and respond to the strange, sometimes threatening, multivocal texts they produce while writing in the contact zone" (408). Young’s model, I believe, can serve as such a supplement.

What Young’s Model Adds
Young’s model of the ideal city, I wish to argue, complements Pratt’s metaphor, since it constructs an explicitly administrative and institutional model. A political theorist, she directs her recommendations to the policymakers who shape urban institutions: she lays out concrete parameters that suggest how those in power can set up public spaces where democratic justice emerges. These proposals also resonate for teachers of writing. Since teachers have many of the same responsibilities and powers within their classrooms that policymakers have in larger communities (for example, the authority to decide on an agenda for discussion, to call on speakers, to evaluate speakers’ contributions, and to make procedural decisions for the entire group), and since universities are, after all, part of these larger communities, it seems reasonable that her urban recommendations might translate smoothly into classroom policymaking.

In addition, Young’s theory merges effectively with the contact zone model because she shares Pratt’s discursive orientation and her concern with validating difference. English courses center on language and culture, phenomena Young specifically ties to her concepts of domination and oppression. She argues that any public forum must “b[ring] language, gestures, ... images, interactive conventions, and so on, into explicit reflection, ... making them the subject of public discussion, and explicitly matters of choice and decision” (86). The composition classroom, a space already dedicated to these sorts of analysis, is therefore an especially promising forum for trying Young’s recommendations. Yet Young’s urban model goes a step further. It does not stop with cultural critique and analysis, as do the other metaphors I’ve discussed. It explicitly foregrounds active participation in issues of public concern and suggests specific processes whereby democratic discussion flourishes. Thus it defines students as producers of language and shapers of their own critical horizons in ways that prevailing pedagogical models do not.

Importing Young’s Model into the Classroom
However, it would be dangerous to assume a direct analogy between the public discursive spaces Young identifies in urban areas and the discussion that goes on in university classrooms, for there are fundamental differences. Perhaps most importantly, classrooms are not “public” spaces in the same way that more direct political forums, such as the
town-hall meetings and neighborhood associations Young cites, are. As Watkins has observed, although universities are public institutions, English professors are allowed a remarkable degree of “private” freedom within their classrooms: for example, individual professors’ teaching practices are rarely scrutinized unless they interfere with the university’s function of assigning grades, and the discourses generating within English classes rarely circulate into extra-academic forums (66). The cloistered nature of English pedagogy and scholarship has a long history, such that the very institutional structure of English departments has evolved to accommodate political insulation. As Gerald Graff’s historical research has documented, most English departments are generally organized around the principle of “field coverage,” in which each professor is assigned responsibility for one discrete part of the literary canon. Students are thereby presented with decontextualized, compartmentalized bits of knowledge that they have little idea how to use, rather than being introduced to broader uses for literacy in their own lives (Graff 249-250). Other scholars have documented that student-produced texts have historically been held in low esteem by audiences both inside and outside the academy, a fact that makes it unlikely for students to feel very confident about entering public political debate—at least by way of the texts they produce in the classroom (Scholes 7). In short, no matter how sincerely teachers desire to connect students’ reading and writing to larger public outlets, the institutional insulation of the academy complicates such efforts.

Nor, however, should we think of classrooms as completely isolated, for the boundaries between the university and the wider community are neither fixed nor absolute. As a recent article by Michael Kleine and Sandy Moore demonstrates, the texts produced in college writing courses do occasionally reach public outlets, sometimes with unpredictably dramatic results—as Moore learned as a student in Kleine’s class, when she was fired from her job after her boss learned about a paper she wrote criticizing the working conditions at his restaurant (94-97). Moore, like Kleine, understood her paper as a personal response to a personal situation; her boss saw it as a public assault on his reputation. What one reader in one context saw as “private” discourse, the another reader in another context assumed was “public.” Reflecting upon the incident, Kleine concludes that it is ethically naive for teachers to ask students to write about potentially divisive issues without making them aware of the dangers they might encounter in exposing their texts to a wider audience: the classroom, he contends, is never a completely safe or politically insulated space, because the language that circulates there is never fully within students’ nor teachers’ control (100). All these scholars’ cautions remind us that the classroom is neither “public” nor “private,” but a complex hybrid of both.
Part of the reason that it is so difficult to locate classroom discourse on a “public/private” continuum is that the boundary between “private” and “public” discourse shifts continually and is ideologically fraught. Any definition of “public discourse” rests on an assumed binary distinction between public and private spheres. As Seyla Benhabib notes, traditional conceptions of this distinction—from Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the classical *polis*, to the liberal individualism of Rawls and Habermas—have restricted “public” discourse to questions of justice, rights, and legitimacy, while excluding familial, sexual, religious, and economic issues as belonging to the “private” realm and therefore outside the “public” interest (“Models” 92). However, a variety of social factors in Western democracies, including increasing corporatization, the speed and reach of mass media, and the democratizing impact of various social movements, have combined in recent years to broaden the kinds of topics and language deemed appropriate for public deliberation. For example, Benhabib says:

> the contemporary women’s movement is making what were hitherto considered private matters of the good life into public issues of justice, by thematizing the asymmetrical power relations on which the sexual division of labor between the genders has rested. In this process the line between the private and the public, issues of justice and matters of the good life are being renegotiated. (“Models” 92)

Ultimately, she argues, we cannot and should not attempt to pigeonhole any topic, any forum, nor any mode of discourse as necessarily “private” nor necessarily “public.” Indeed, scholars who adopt a postmodern view of politics, which emphasizes “making public” the concerns of all groups “in the sense of making them accessible to debate, reflection, action, and moral-political transformation” must abandon narrow conceptions of publicity and privacy in favor of more procedural, contingent understandings of these terms. This means, for teachers of rhetoric, that we must remain open to seeing our classroom activities as potentially relevant to public debate, even as we recognize institutional barriers to publicity and deconstruct reductive or utopian ideas about what “going public” with our discourse means.

Just as we should not rely on traditional distinctions between “private” and “public” discourse, nor should we cling to old notions of what constitutes a “public” forum. According to feminist social theorist Nancy Fraser, prevailing ideas about what constitutes the “public sphere” are heavily influenced by liberal individualism, which idealizes it as a singular, overtly political arena characterized by “accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies” where individual citizens participate in decisionmaking about items of universal concern (“Rethinking” 115). An example of this kind of public sphere
is the bourgeois public sphere that emerged in the coffeehouses of the cities of mid-eighteenth-century Europe, described in Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. The problem, Fraser realizes, is that in assuming a single, unitary public, this school of thought has ignored the existence of other, competing, nonliberal, nonbourgeois public spheres—including women's voluntary associations, labor organizations, and protest movements—that did not operate according to liberal bourgeois conventions, but which addressed deliberative issues nonetheless. She argues that scholars would do better to embrace, not a unitary notion of public discourse, but a notion that assumes "the proliferation of a multiplicity of publics," representing a multiplicity of groups, agendas and ways of speaking, as constitutive of democracy ("Rethinking" 122). Fraser also suggests that we conceive of public forums as serving a variety of possible functions, including "weak publics," whose primary aim is to formulate and disseminate opinion; and "strong publics" which, in addition, take an official role in public decision-making ("Rethinking" 134-135). Recognizing these different functions enriches our understanding of the varied possibilities public deliberation holds for scholars, teachers, and students.

Fraser's recognition that "public sphere" is a multiple concept sheds light on the function writing classrooms serve in promoting public deliberation. While clearly a writing classroom is not a "public sphere" in the Habermasian sense of the word, it does comprise a space wherein individuals and groups organize to talk about issues of current concern. Thus, it might be thought of as an example of the kind of "weak public" that Fraser defines: a forum where opinions are explored and disseminated, even though their authors are not empowered to enact policy based upon those opinions. Alternatively, Rosa Eberly proposes that we view writing classrooms as "proto-public spheres" where students prepare to enter more traditional public arenas. The writing classroom, she contends, can serve as a space where students become aware of issues that affect them and research venues and groups that might be persuaded to join in a discussion of those issues:

For teachers and students in writing classrooms, studying the formations of publics, the different subjectivities students might try out for different publics at different points in their formation or disintegration, the gradations of publicness and expertise in academic and professional writing, and the processes through which subalterns choose or do not choose to join larger or wider publics provides a rich and complex alternative to studying individual arguments tailored to ideal, prefabricated, homological audiences. (20)

Fraser and Eberly's ideas raise the possibility that the classroom may be a different, but no less valid, form of public sphere than scholars have traditionally imagined.
Rhetoric teachers might also productively investigate not only whether the classroom comprises a discrete public sphere, but also the ways in which it connects to other, extra-academic publics. In a recent article, Wells has outlined three such possibilities: First, the classroom might become a kind of critical meta-public that looks at the discourse produced in various other public spheres—including alternative and counter publics—with the aim of "search[ing] for forms of effective public advocacy that are not immediately reducible to brutal rhetorical advantage" (339). Second, teachers might place students in community organizations with the goal of having them produce "writing that will enter some form of public space" outside the university (339). Finally, teachers might consider ways in which they can encourage students to enter the public discourse engaged in by various academic disciplines. This last strategy, says Wells, "would take up directly the possibilities and the problems of the university's location in relation to the public and the professions" (340). But whether one adopts one of Wells' agendas or seeks new ones, the point is that Young's urban model will be a productive one for rhetoric teachers if we are willing to conceive of ours and our students' work as embodying multiple, shifting relations to issues and discourses that circulate both within and outside our classrooms.

Another possible limitation of Young's model is that the public spaces she imagines revolve around the intermingling of distinct groups and cultures in city life. Within cities, differences are numerous, ever-present, and continually negotiated (240). Isolated, homogenous communities, she warns, do not promote the diversity essential to democratic deliberation. Unfortunately, as Ellen Cushman, and others have pointed out, universities are not designed to attract a diverse community, and as a result, most writing classes are dominated by white, middle-class, mainstream students who may see little reason to consider alternative perspectives (9). Educational activist Jonathan Kozol documents this problem when he quotes from his conversation with an affluent student in an exclusive, all-white suburban high school. Asked during an interview whether he believed school integration was morally desirable, the student whose response received enthusiastic agreement from most of the class replied, "I don't see why we should do it. How could it be of benefit to us?" (126). Clearly, if writing teachers allow their classes to become isolated and self-centered, they cannot fulfill the promise that Young's model offers. Thus, rhetoric teachers must explore ways to expand the borders of their classrooms to engage students in discursive interactions with unfamiliar groups. Such activities will help create the kind of "bridges" between academic discourse and political practice that theorists like Benhabib and Fraser identify as important (Fraser, *Unruly* 11-14).
Building a Public Pedagogy
What, then, would a classroom informed by Young's model look like? If she were asked to design an undergraduate writing course, Young would probably recommend that it, like any other democratic public space, match the general outlines of her urban ideal: It should (1) allow debate among heterogeneous viewpoints and groups; (2) value conflict as well as consensus; (3) support disenfranchised perspectives; and (4) recognize and embrace the multiple shapes that public deliberation can take. The first three of these features characterize many of the best teaching practices already ongoing in our discipline. Both Virginia S. Anderson and Dennis Lynch and his colleagues, for example, have recently described courses that encourage students to engage responsibly with diverse perspectives on current debates (e.g., Anderson 209-211, Lynch et al 69-82). Similarly, teachers who incorporate service-learning projects into their composition courses acquaint students with both new audiences and new forums for their writing (e.g., Peck et al 207-220; Schutz and Gere 137-141).

Somewhat less common in our field are courses that build on Young's realization that "public discourse" is a complicated and slippery entity—courses that connect students to a range of non-traditional and traditional public spheres and ask them to reflect on what "public" discourse means. One promising example of this sort of focus was recently piloted in a writing internship course developed by my colleague Carolyn Matalene at the University of South Carolina. First offered during the Spring 1999 semester, the course placed students in writing jobs at a variety of public and private agencies, ranging from the state arts commission, to the university business school's communication center, to the state commission on minority affairs. Students used class meetings as a forum for analyzing their internship work through the critical lenses of various rhetorical theories and for discussing the different ethical, intellectual, and rhetorical challenges public expression involved in the different settings (Matalene "Syllabus").

One student intern, for example, worked as the only white employee at the state Commission on Minority Affairs. Several class discussions dealt with her struggle to figure out how to participate in discussions about race within the agency and to craft a series of public-service announcements about teenage pregnancy—each aimed at a different demographic group (Fosen). As Chris Fosen, a graduate student who observed and assisted with the course recalls, "Specifically [this student] was importing concepts of heteroglossia and multivocality that she had read in Bakhtin and Henry Louis Gates into our class conversations. These concepts helped her to come to grips with the frequent shifts in discourse (changes in tenor and dialect) that she heard every day at work." The course encouraged this student and the others in the course not only to find public spaces in which to write, but it also
provided a space within which they could reflect on what it meant to write for a particular public. In Matalene's words, such courses teach students "something real about the complexities of public life, public agencies, public decision making processes, and texts in public contexts" ("Texts" 66). As Young might put it, students in the course gained a better understanding of the diverse forums—the discursive "city"—through which words shape public life.

As these few examples suggest, Young's model can help us to theorize the connections between our classrooms and wider public forums. Even though it does not provide a foolproof nor fully detailed pedagogical blueprint, her model supplements existing approaches to politicized teaching in instructive ways. What remains is for teachers to continue to develop teaching strategies that translate her theory into concrete practice. In so doing, we will potentially help students forge what Nancy Fraser calls "bridge discourses" between the academic and the political—discourses that can ultimately spark meaningful public involvement and positive social change.3

Notes

1 This summary of Young's book is an expanded version of a discussion that originally appeared in my "Ethics in the Classroom: A Nondistributive Approach" (College English 56.5 [Sept. 1994]: 548-567).

2 An early version of the course, which asked students to find informal internships but did not focus as explicitly on public writing, was offered in 1996, but the current version of the course debuted in Spring 1999.

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