At the beginning of homeroom period on my first day of seventh grade, the teacher read a list of students and directed them to go to another room to get their class schedules. I could tell from the teacher’s tone that this was a list I wanted to be on. I listened attentively for my name to be called, even after he passed my spot in the alphabet. I reasoned hopefully that if my name were not on the list, then perhaps I had misread his tone and it was a bad list rather than a good one. But my stomach stayed in a knot. After the chosen group had left, the teacher gave the rest of us our schedules, and it became clear that those who had left were in the honors track and the rest of us were not. On the way out of homeroom, I asked the teacher to check his list again. I had always been a straight-A student and had never even seen a C on my report card. What did it take to get into the honors class? But, no, my name was not there, and the teacher could do nothing about it.

I went off to my classes, all located on the bottom floor of Memorial Junior High. The rooms had high ceilings with small windows at the top of the back wall, just like a basement. The other students looked bored and some, even on the first day, spent the period with their heads on their desks. The teachers all seemed to have the same teaching style: they handed out worksheets that occupied the class for most of the period; then they announced the homework. The worksheets seemed infantile to me; the knot stayed in my stomach. I told my story to each teacher, and received from each no more than a sympathetic smile.

During lunch period, I found the assistant principal, who told me that the school got tracking assignments from central administration. She said that the school was simply not allowed to make changes but that she would contact central administration and see what had happened in my case. My mother called after school and got the same answer. In a few days, we learned that my records had not arrived from my elementary school, which was in the next state (my family had moved that summer). My mother spoke to the principal and repeated that I was an A student. The principal replied, “I believe you, but I need official documentation.”
showed him my old report cards, but he said that they were not "official documents." My parents argued with the principal several times. I pleaded that the regular classes were too easy. My biggest concern was that I was losing valuable time at the beginning of the year. The honors classes, where I would surely wind up eventually, were getting ahead; and when I got there, I would be at a disadvantage. Nothing worked. The principal was kind and sympathetic but repeated that he could do nothing.

"Listen," I begged, "what can it hurt to put me in the honors class? If I can handle the work, it will prove that I belonged there in the first place. If I fail, I'll just go back to the regular classes. Why wouldn't you agree to a request like this from any student, any student at all who wanted to try to do the harder work?" The principal assured me that he didn't doubt my ability, my mother's word, or the evidence of the report cards. He simply could not do anything until my records arrived. I don't remember if he ever answered my question.

About two weeks into the semester, I was handed a note, instructing me to see each of my teachers and show them the note; I was now reassigned to the honors track and would begin attending classes immediately. During first period, I handed the note to Mrs. Beard, who congratulated me and told me that she was sorry to see me go because I was the only one in the class who always correctly answered all the worksheet questions. (I diligently did the worksheets in the absurd hope that someone would realize that a mistake had been made.) Then, I went upstairs to Mr. Farnelli's science class. I had assumed that all the seventh grade classes were in the basement and that we would move up with each grade. But all my new classes were on the second and third floors.

I entered Mr. Farnelli's class and was literally dazzled. Floor-to-ceiling windows stretched the entire length of the side wall. Opposite the windows, glass-fronted cases held ranks of microscopes, bottles of chemicals, racks of test tubes, stacks of petri dishes, and rows of Erlenmeyer flasks (how I envied Erlenmeyer, who had such an elegant thing named for him). Instead of desks, students sat in pairs at lab tables, each with a black slate top and two gas jets. The floor was stepped from front to back like a college lecture hall, so that each set of tables was on its own level. Despite the knot in my stomach from anxiety about being the new kid and needing to catch up with the schoolwork I had missed during my time in the basement, I felt that I had ascended almost to heaven.

I sometimes tell this story to my first-year composition class while we are reading Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*. Rose describes how he was one of those students who was "scuttling along at the bottom" of the
school system until a teacher saw his potential and elevated him to the honors track (26). But such upward movement was a rarity. For most of the kids in his book, low-track placement was a life sentence. For kids who don’t have an exceptional teacher or parents who will advocate for them, there is no escape. As psychologist Sheila Tobias laments, “Those who test well are encouraged and expected to succeed and offered the most challenging work. Those who do not, get a watered-down curriculum that reflects the system’s minimal expectations of them” (55). Thus, this diluted curriculum guarantees immobility. My own story further shows the utter paralysis of the system even in the face of a simple error.

My students easily see the significance of the windows and worksheets in my story, and some of the students have similar stories about themselves or friends who felt victimized or embarrassed or helpless in the tracking system. Tracking comes up frequently in Rose’s book and in some of our other readings on education in the United States. Moreover, tracking becomes an issue for my students because they serve as tutors at a local public school through our class’ service-learning project. Every year, one or two of them will choose tracking as a topic for the research paper that they write in the second semester.

In their research, students find that academic studies are virtually unanimous in condemning tracking. In principle, tracking is supposed to benefit all students, but, in practice, it focuses resources in the upper tracks. The differences in materials, teacher attitudes, and curriculum are described in both long-term studies, such as Jeannie Oakes’ Keeping Track, and in innumerable follow-up studies in the journals of the NEA and Phi Delta Kappa. Studies confirm Jonathan Kozol’s observations in Savage Inequalities that tracks are thoroughly divided by race (Tobias contends that tracking was in part a strategy for resegregation). Moreover, the walls between the tracks are virtually impermeable. Once a student is ensconced in a lower track, differences in curriculum (and, as Rose reveals so vividly, in attitude) make it almost impossible to move up. Finally, the different tracks come to seem like different countries. Actual ability or performance cease to matter, as my situation showed. What I lacked was a properly stamped passport. The kind of barrier that I faced is insurmountable when it is placed before children and parents who lack the resources to attack it.

My students readily find that the kind of sources I have noted and their drafts, like many of the books and articles they read, often take on a self-righteous tone as they condemn the racism and classism that characterizes tracking and as they lament the needless damage done to students by
inequitable resource distribution and by the inherent evils of the system. They also find an increasing number of studies extolling the virtues of non-tracked classrooms ("heterogeneous grouping," as the jargon has it).

Part of the writing assignment that I make is, of course, to represent all of the arguments or perspectives on an issue, so the students make a real effort to find proponents of tracking. While every year they find more new sources opposing tracking, it is remarkable that every year they cite the same two or three academic defenders of tracking and can find no more. It seems as though there is hardly any other side to this debate. Still, tracking remains standard practice.

At this point, I ask the students to reconsider the focus of their research. They have been trying to say whether tracking is good or bad, and they are supporting the thesis that it is bad. I ask them to consider this key question: if it is overwhelmingly clear that tracking is a bad policy and practice, why is it that tracking not only continues to exist but continues to be the norm in public schools? Is the harm caused by tracking a new discovery? No, since sources going back many years testify to the inequities in the practice. Are the academic studies, the experiments in non-tracked classes, and the arguments of Rose and others unknown to school officials and teachers? Probably not, since such reports appear in teachers' magazines and ordinary daily newspapers. Well, then? What's the story?

Many of the other topics that students work on bring them to a similar point, a point at which academic knowledge and public policy are at odds—or in an odd relation. Research into prison education is a striking example. Here, too, it is almost universally found by researchers that education in prison dramatically reduces recidivism. Some eighty percent of sentenced inmates are illiterate (and, by the way, most of the illiterate are black and Hispanic). The cost of prison education is far, far less than the police and court and prison costs of recidivism. These facts seem to be well-established. Yet, prison education programs continue to be attacked and dismantled by certain citizens' groups, by legislators and governors, even by wardens. Opponents consider prison education, together with television and sports equipment and conjugal visits, to be entertainment and coddling. In this case, as in the case of tracking and so many other topics in our course, the public policy question must be asked: if the answers are so clear, why are discredited policies still in place, and why are they still defended?

My students are admirable people. They volunteer to take my year-long first-year composition course with its required community service
project. They go through a workshop for tutors. They get themselves to Boston—to the Pine Street Inn or to Waltham Middle School or to Hamilton Elementary—every week. And when they begin working on research projects investigating the conditions of education in the U.S., they bring a special passion and commitment to the issues they confront—issues such as the unequal distribution of resources to schools in different communities in the same state; the efficacy of school choice or voucher programs; the representation of minorities in school textbooks; the use of IQ testing, prison literacy programs, multicultural curricula, or tracking. They also learn how to leave campus and observe on their own—a major benefit of service learning.

The required research paper in my service-learning course attempts to take advantage of the special qualities and new abilities of these students, who are required to include field observation and personal investigation in their papers. They may visit a prison education program and talk to the inmates, teachers, and warden; they may compare two schools that are differently funded and talk to the students; they may attend school board meetings, and so on. As for their print and Internet sources, they must cite material from three different audience categories (broadly defined): professional publications by academic experts; popular works by experts, journalists, or policy makers; and public works such as newspaper articles, editorials, and Web postings.

What they find when they compare academic sources with more popular ones is not surprising. By and large, public policy follows popular, not academic, opinion. In the case of tracking, for example, despite some movement by principals and activist teachers toward heterogeneous grouping, the determining arguments time and again are either flat assertions by parents that lower-track kids will drag non-tracked classes down to their level, or statements by teachers that they would need lots of expensive training to be able to teach non-tracked classes.

For several years, I worked to move my students toward analyzing this gap between academic investigation, on the one hand, and public discourse and public policy, on the other. I hoped they could observe the ways that academic studies were used or reflected in the more popular media and that they could say which voices seemed to have the greatest effect on public policy in the spheres they studied. This was too sophisticated an assignment for them, no matter how I tried to package it. More recently, I have asked a different question: how could you—or someone who held your position on the issue you have studied and who was motivated to do so—bring your arguments effectively before the public?
This new question has been much more successful in revealing some of the boundary issues in crossing from academic to public discourse. It has also opened the classroom to discussion of producing public discourse, a move that, in a first-year composition course, caused me some trepidation.

The topics my students have chosen are serious issues of public policy, but the students have a strong and perfectly natural tendency, when writing a research paper, to adopt a formal academic approach. This is hardly surprising. They feel that they don’t have the ability to contribute anything new to the academic discussion, and they cannot imagine entering public discourse. Of course, they are not wrong to recognize that they are novices, that they lack the knowledge and authority to add their voices to long-running conversations among powerful interlocutors. In addition, they know that their teachers, especially in college, expect academic papers: papers that are abstract, formal, and addressed to “everyone” in the sense of “no one”; papers that are proof of diligence and that are aids to their own learning but devoid of any other purpose. Moreover, as a teacher of composition, I myself am bound to help them learn this form of writing. As a teacher of rhetoric, however, I feel the inadequacy of the form and of the automatic move to its safety and comfort. I am not the only one.

In his 1996 Chair’s address to the CCCC convention, Lester Faigley called on writing teachers and all academics to enter public discourse, not only to represent our work for ourselves but also to engage in the serious questions of public policy that affect us and about which we have knowledge to share. The week following Faigley’s address, history professor Russell Jacoby made the same plea in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Gerald Graff has repeatedly sounded this call and has worked to heed it in his own writing. Rose, too, has shown how to straddle the line between academic analysis and public discourse.

If we wish to claim that the composition course is truly about rhetoric, about civic virtue, and about public as well as academic discourse, we must learn how to conceptualize the connections between the academy and society in ways that our students, our administrators, and we ourselves find convincing. In constructing ourselves as experts—a role we find comfortable and that society supports—we isolate ourselves, falling prey to instrumentalist justifications of our work (that is, the teaching of composition as a set of skills) and the ideological consequences that follow. Even worse, we come to view society as a research site and not as a realm of true engagement. My students’ tendency to write academic
papers reveals the genesis of our own identical inclination.

I must hasten to say that I do not advocate that we abandon teaching academic discourse, especially in the first-year composition course. The trepidation I mentioned earlier—my hesitation about having students write public discourse—arose chiefly from a sense of obligation to stick to the academic and not to waste students' time with hollow "letter to the editor" exercises. What I want to understand better is the practical or, more importantly, theoretical justification for teaching public-discourse writing to my class.¹

I can think of four possibilities. First, there is the claim that students are more engaged by current issues. The engagement theory seems to say that we can use whatever "works," whatever stimulates student interest. If current public issues will be interesting to students, then such issues can be our source of topics. If it seems exciting to write a letter to the editor or an article for the school newspaper, then we can make the most of these venues to teach rhetoric. I do not mean to be dismissive of this pedagogy. I know teachers who do very good work using newspapers as course texts and whose students appear to learn a great deal about writing. I regard this justification, however, as theoretically weak. The "whatever works" argument can be used to justify, after the fact, any kind of reading and writing—personal narrative, fiction, journalism, literary criticism—that seems to the instructor to "work." I want to see a strong before-the-fact argument, one that goes directly to the issue: why should we teach public discourse qua public discourse?

A second justification is that the rhetorical immediacy of public discourse helps students understand audience and genre constraints. In fact, this view forms the basis of an important and well-established model of service learning in composition in which students write documents for community agencies. This approach does a real service for non-profit companies, providing them with manuals, newsletters, reports, and so on. Students do indeed face audience and format constraints. They must learn the appropriate professional discourse, meet deadlines, satisfy their supervisors—all valuable experiences, to be sure. I don't use this approach, mainly for practical reasons. Students have to complete sophisticated writing tasks well to serve the agencies' needs and I don't think my students can perform well enough. Also, I am not inclined to have a writing internship replace direct service, such as tutoring. I have some concern, too, that this sort of writing would overwhelm the academic research and writing part of the course.

A third justification concerns critical pedagogy, the goal of which is
to promote social consciousness or something like a Freirean critical consciousness and, if possible, to lead students to social action. This approach thus also supports service learning (though, significantly, service learning has other sources of theoretical support). Critical pedagogy appeals to many writing teachers, including me, who have a political orientation toward teaching. While it does not require teaching the rhetorical forms of public discourse, critical pedagogy does provide a coherent argument for taking up public issues in the classroom—though, to be sure, its critics claim that a blatant political orientation is inappropriate and irrelevant to the main goal of improving students’ writing.

The fourth, and perhaps most attractive, is the historical justification. In the history of rhetoric we have a noble tradition of education for civic leadership. This is the legacy of Isocrates, of Cicero, and of the medieval university, whose mission was to create civic and ecclesiastical leaders. Educating students to produce public discourse was the whole point! But are we justified today in focusing our idea of rhetoric and our composition pedagogy on civic discourse, on public policy, on citizenship? After all, our institutions of higher education are very different from the schools of Isocrates and Cicero or the universities of medieval Europe. Our colleges are technical and professional; they are no longer essentially civic in nature. Are we not presumptuous in proposing to teach about social issues, to encroach upon political science and sociology? Isn’t our job (at least in required composition courses) to teach the conventions of academic discourse, the formal features of language, the strategies of college writing? If we claim that civic discourse is now the focus of rhetorical education, are we abandoning our proper role? Is this what we are being paid to do? Can we fulfill our roles as teachers of academic discourse while adopting this new role as educators for democracy?

I am not among those who criticize academic discourse or seek its demise. Although I would be happy to see some of the changes its critics propose, I will not teach my students some alternative to academic discourse that doesn’t presently exist in the hope that they—mere undergraduates—will exert pressure for change. Thus, my own longstanding approach has been to assign an academic research paper that draws in various ways on the students’ powerful experiences in the service project. This method produces a deep understanding of the issues, deeper than performing service and observing alone could possibly produce. It thus seems to satisfy the goals of critical pedagogy while teaching academic discourse.
Still, this approach did not lead my class into the gap between research and policy—in other words, it did not engage the issues “on the ground” (as the BBC journalists so colorfully put it). Surely, there was an opportunity here, because it should be possible in a service-learning class to construct a bridge between academic and public discourse, between technical education and education for democracy.

What I sought, in other words, was a way to move students toward a fairly traditional kind of public rhetoric that would require them not only to examine and practice public discourse forms but also to figure out how to bring their academic knowledge to bear in public argument. This path is fraught with well-documented perils. Reviewing the complexity of the public sphere, its “array of discursive practices,” and its historical density, Susan Wells says, “We do not do justice to this history, this set of possibilities, when we assign students generic public writing, such as an essay on gun control, or a letter to a nonexistent editor” (328).

I put this problem to my students: “You are doing a lot of work. Your research papers are extensive. Most of you are passionate about the arguments you are making. What is going to happen to your work when you are finished? Will it go anywhere other than my desk? Can we imagine ways of going public?”

We addressed this question in stages. First, students took a week to look over the sources they had already used, to poke around the Web, and to brainstorm about ways to go public. In one class meeting, we discussed the forums for public argument. Students first offered basic forms—books, articles, and so on—as ways of going public. The power of textbooks to influence the public was pointed out. Students suggested personal appearances at particular forums—school board and PTA meetings, for example. They also suggested making phone calls. (I hadn’t thought of this one, despite the amount of phone-nagging I do myself.) They suggested running for public office (another I hadn’t expected to hear) and lobbying. Finally, they suggested numerous other forums—pamphlets and fliers, radio and television, interactive Web sites, specialized Web postings, email campaigns, booths at fairs, demonstrations, bumper stickers, and tee-shirts—as well as a number of activities: searching for organizations, starting organizations, engaging in community activism, and sponsoring benefit rock concerts. Step one worked well, I thought. Somewhere in there was the letter to the editor, but it hardly mattered.

In the second stage, I asked students to pick a medium or form and to figure out its rhetorical characteristics. Who uses the medium? Who is the
audience? How much space or time is there to make a case? What kinds of arguments and evidence are used? I asked students to choose a way to go public that seemed appropriate for their arguments and to begin to think about how they might do it.

The discussion that followed included a letter to the editor, but it was a specific editor at a particular local newspaper in the community where the student had done part of her research. Leslie (all student names in this article are fictitious) had sample letters to this paper, an estimate of their length, and a sense that there were different approaches to be considered. She also introduced the problem of length—or rather brevity—which seemed to characterize so many of the public discourse forms. The same student also had an assessment of speaking at school committee meetings: it would be necessary, she pointed out, to yell. Jill also wanted to write to an editor—of The Nation, it turned out, because she liked the articles it publishes. But did it make sense, she asked, to write to a publication that you agreed with? This was a good audience question: if you want to affect public ideas, wouldn’t it make more sense to find an audience who disagreed with you initially?

John liked the idea of a flier campaign and, in the third stage, produced a flier to show us how it would work. Using clip art from his computer, simple layout, and easy vocabulary, he produced a flier urging elementary school students (he targeted the kids at Hamilton Elementary, where we did our service project) to see the value of education and commit to doing better on their homework. His second flier was designed to convince kids and their parents to commit to a joint effort to improve homework. The third one urged parents to organize a campaign to get the school board to provide more money for books for the school’s limited library.

Jennifer, who was writing about the Ebonics debate, wanted to sharpen her response to someone she had overheard making fun of black English, running down bilingual education, and opposing programs for immigrants. It turned out that what she reported saying was already pretty sharp, but the discussion that ensued in class—about the importance of even these individual encounters—was very worthwhile. Pat was interested in talk radio responses about his topic, prison education, which was an issue that had recently come up again in the press. In this situation, rhetorical constraints consist of how fast you had to talk, how long you might expect to go before being cut off, and what reaction you might try to provoke. Being witty was clearly desirable, and Pat certainly was.

In the third stage, I asked students to produce a sample letter, script, or Web posting that conformed to the constraints we discovered. Mike,
who was also working on Ebonics, printed out a viciously racist Web page with an address for postings, plus his two-part submission—a short, punchy version of his argument, followed by the entire text of his research paper! Donna created a survey on integration and busing. The short survey included a short history and explanation of busing. Donna reasoned that people loved to answer surveys and that this one would be educational and perhaps stir up debate. There were several letters to the editor and Web postings, all with addresses and copies of the editorials or other letters to which the students were responding. David, who introduced the idea of a benefit rock concert, explained in detail how it would work. Bands would donate their services, the hall would be donated, the admission price would be low (drawing big crowds), and a record company would even produce a CD with the participating bands. David couldn’t produce the concert, of course, but he did produce a set of CD liner notes that consisted primarily of his research paper, printed in a tiny font.

These efforts were not especially polished. Some of these efforts, by their nature, could not go beyond sketches. Some students did send off their letters and postings, but only a few of the efforts had the feel, to me, of a fake exercise. When I raised that possibility with the students, however, they told me that I was the only one worried about it. Several mentioned later that they liked the idea of figuring out how to make use of arguments that they worked on in their research projects.

There were other benefits, too. The focus on effective argumentation in the exercise on “going public” fed back into the research papers. So many of the public statements were refutations of other arguments that students brought new energy to what was often a perfunctory exercise in acknowledging the existence of opposing points of view. Unexpectedly, too, we wound up working at length on integrated citation style. Students wanted to avoid the clumsiness and lack of popular appeal in discourse that displayed footnotes or other academic citation forms, but they wanted to learn how to use academic style (and I wanted them to learn it) so that they could use it correctly in school papers. I found some examples of integrated forms—a style in which authors and works were fully identified in the text (“Educator Mortimer Adler, author of The Paideia Proposal . . .”) and followed by a standard academic citation as well, which was adopted by most of the students.

Looking at the differences between their academic papers and their “going public” exercises sharpened the class’s understanding of the purposes of different sources. While teachers complain about students who use magazines like Newsweek as main sources, it’s more common in
my classes for students to ignore *Newsweek* altogether and stick to academic sources. These students can miss the sense that there are public debates about the issues. They may be dismissive of all popular sources. Even those students who use both academic and journalistic sources will put them side by side in jarring ways. But by examining the public policy debate as a part of the issue at hand, students can better see the rhetorical dimension of academic and public discourses. This concern increases with the use of the World Wide Web for research. Our exercise with forms of public discourse gave students the chance to get a taste of writing in popular media and helped them not only distinguish among audiences but also to see the persuasive purposes of different forms.

Furthermore, in an effort to look for a way to help students get a rhetorical grip on the organization of their research papers (which are unusually long and complicated as first-year research papers go), I recommend Quintilian's five-part scheme: introduction (*exordium*), narration (*narratio*), argument (*confirmatio*), refutation (*refutatio*), and conclusion (*peroratio*). This method of arrangement works remarkably well both for the academic research paper, and (why was I surprised by this?) for public discourse. The textbook method of organization—group related ideas and put them in logical order—founders on the ambiguity of "logical order." With a rhetorical purpose in view for "going public," we were able to see the virtue of arranging the more academic paper for rhetorical effect. I warn students that not all of their professors will be engaged by the engaging exordium (an illustration, example, revealing story, startling statistic, or other striking way to introduce the issue). However, students who use it in other courses report frequent success: it is very sophisticated when done well. So, too, with the other elements: adaptation is important, but having the basic tool makes adaptation possible. Students, too, are impressed to learn that there is an ancient art of persuasion. With their encouragement, I often introduce the three appeals and even some matters of style. And, of course, I point out the civic goals of classical rhetoric.

Susan Wells, whom I cited earlier on the vacuity of typical letter-to-the-editor assignments, makes a number of important observations about teaching public discourse, observations I should consider before concluding on a triumphant note. Wells describes four ways of dedicating composition classes to public writing. The first approach is to regard the classroom itself as "a version of the public sphere" (338). She criticizes this approach for its typical lack of true exigency—the texts that students produce don’t actually affect anything within the classroom. The second
approach is to teach the analysis of public discourse, which aligns the class with "the powerful traditions of rhetorical study" and "mortgages composition to the analytic bias of such study" (339). The problem here is that (if I understand Wells correctly) analysis and evaluation are not themselves forms of public discourse. The third approach aims "to produce student writing that will enter some form of public space" (339). Here, Wells appears to be referring to internship work, such as the writing-for-agencies model of service learning. Her concern is that "direct experience of the social can be a very convincing argument for the impossibility of change" (339). The fourth strategy, one she unreservedly endorses, is a class that examines the ways that different academic disciplines engage their publics, a class in which students practice producing discourses that are so addressed. This last form is necessarily an advanced course to which students bring disciplinary expertise.

Wells raises important questions about our goals in asking students to write for the public sphere. The approaches she presents reveal difficulty in creating a pedagogy that will achieve the desired aims. Her third approach—the one closest to service learning—may certainly produce resignation and doubt rather than commitment. I don’t agree, however, that this risk is greater than the rewards. To be sure, service learning doesn’t always work well. It requires a great deal of mere managing and arranging, and things can go terribly wrong. Many service-learning writing courses and programs do seem undertheorized; however, I believe this is often a consequence of the effort to manage details of placements and travel and oversight. In more mature courses and programs, success is typical. Students do see possibilities for change, and they can see—and teach us to see—that publics can be addressed if we are truly willing to engage them.

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Notes

1. I want to thank Tom Deans for criticizing me for this reluctance to pursue public discourse in my class, which he does in Writing Partnerships, a book that offers a superb analysis of service learning in composition, both in practical and theoretical terms. His book is currently under review. I have summarized some of its main points in "Service Learning and Public Discourse."
Works Cited


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