losophy; and on the implications of research methods and theory for our classroom teaching.

Readers who have followed Dasenbrock's work since the late 1980s will likely find familiar material here (a fair portion of the book is substantially reworked from essays that have already been published) but the central restatement and integration of his otherwise far-flung arguments is valuable, nevertheless, because Dasenbrock's work is, simply put, worth reading and rereading.


Reviewed by Derek Owens, St. John's University

After reading the first two chapters of Christian Weisser's Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere, I'd already decided to assign them as required texts for my graduate course in composition theory. (Patricia Bizzell's back cover blurb is right: the book is so direct, one could teach it in undergraduate as well as graduate courses.) It is Weisser's steady, lucid prose that allows him in one thin volume to offer a useful overview of composition's major moments, home in on several threads running through composition's radical turn, and ultimately argue that the most important work being done in composition today involves public writing by students and faculty. Weisser's primary argument is that writing within the public sphere is one of critical pedagogy's most significant contemporary preoccupations, and it will likely become "the next dominant focal point around which the teaching of college writing is theorized and imagined." I tend to agree: given the cultural, economic, and environmental crises influencing our students' families, neighborhoods, and futures, it's hard to think of work in composition more important than making connections across academic lines between classroom and community, whether through collaboration, service learning, or other engagements with public discourse. While others have argued recently that service learning has become the new raison d'être for English studies, Weisser is the first to
situate this recent shift within conversations about public sphere going back several decades.

Despite its brevity, the summary of student-centered approaches to writing instruction in chapter one will be of value to students new to the field, as it charts the discipline's origins and subsequent shifts through expressivist, cognitivist, and social constructionist phases. While any brief overview can't help but leave out many of the field's conversations and debates, I'm impressed with how Weisser conveys forty years in just two dozen pages. This overview, although obviously positioned to demonstrate the discipline's inevitable progression to public writing, nevertheless offers a refreshingly cohesive narrative. It's not necessarily the perspective that a Geoffrey Sirc or even a Stephen North might offer, but I suspect that many readers, particularly those new to composition, will welcome Weisser's timeline. If nothing else, I've no doubt that this chapter will be used frequently in graduate and undergraduate courses on composition theory. (I found helpful his reminder that the cognitivists and expressivists, though methodologically very different, had much in common when it came to their mutual insistence on student-centered pedagogies, a connection I've overlooked in the past.)

In the second chapter, Weisser emphasizes how social constructionism's shift from a focus on the individual writer to public investigations of discourse created a foundation for existing explorations of public writing, to the point that the word "public" should now be recognized as one of compositions new key words. Drawing on work by Irene Ward, Ellen Cushman, Joseph Harris, and especially Susan Wells, Weisser moves toward an understanding of writing within the public sphere as encompassing a variety of forms: Web-based communities, student collaboration, networked classes, community literacy programs, and various service-learning initiatives. Ultimately, Weisser see this kind of activity as essential for contemporary composition pedagogy: "Compositionists, then, must work to create spaces where audiences do exist and where student writing has importance and potential consequences."

Eager to offer some coherence to an array of disconnected conversations regarding public writing, Weisser examines in the third chapter several key theoretical texts on the public sphere, most notably the work of Richard Sennett and Jürgen Habermas, along with Habermas' later critics Oskar Negt, Alexander Kulge, and Nancy Fraser. From Habermas' effort to promote an idealized, utopian public realm, to later critics' examinations of the concept of the public sphere through ideological and
feminist critique, Weisser wants compositionists to understand the historical and theoretical context for today's preoccupation with public discourse. Understanding the historical and theoretical contexts linked to composition's current preoccupation with public writing is certainly helpful in establishing some larger framework for current work in service learning and public discourse. As valuable as this literature review is, however, in this chapter I found myself waiting for Weisser to offer several new theoretical insights into the mix. His desire that compositionists "develop a more specific theoretical approach to public writing" as a result of reading public sphere theorists leads readers to ask how, precisely, Weisser has used this literature to construct his own theory and pedagogy.

Chapter four is the closest Weisser gets to shedding light on this question. He offers his own pedagogical objective: to get students "to speak and write discourse that will enable them to take part in the political and social spheres of American life" and become "active citizens who are capable of using language to defend themselves, voice their opinions, and take part in public debates." Impatient with colleagues who naively think that teaching "public discourse" means forcing students to write uninspired letters to the editor, Weisser argues that public writing "entails being able to make your voice heard on an issue that directly confronts or influences you." Just as importantly, students should be trained to view both the potential and the limitations of public discourse with critical skepticism: "Any course or assignment focusing on public writing must recognize the degree to which a number of other social forces—among them race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, occupation, class—influence the idealized, status-free public spheres envisioned by some writing instructors." Returning once again to public sphere theory, Weisser applies Fraser's concept of "subaltern counterpublics"—discursive zones and networks that facilitate critiques of dominant discourse among marginalized peoples—to the objectives of the writing classroom: "As compositionists, it should be our responsibility to help students discover the various counterpublics where their public writing might have a receptive audience and, consequently, might result in significant outcomes. . . . Compositionists should work to create spaces for public writing if they don't exist or aren't readily entered by students."

Despite this emphasis on the teacher's responsibility for designing a public writing pedagogy, Weisser's main interest in these third and fourth chapters lies in reviewing some of the finer points of public sphere theory: recognizing the limitations of considering "public" and "private" as
mutually exclusive concepts, detecting the “bracketing of difference” in public writing, forging opportunities for decision making and action. It is not until the last five paragraphs of the fourth chapter that we’re offered a glimpse into one of his classes, an advanced composition course titled “Environmental Discourse and Public Writing.” Weisser’s goals were to “raise student awareness of environmental problems, to help students to become ‘environmentally literate,’ and, perhaps most importantly, to enable students to voice their own opinions and bring about environmental change through public discourse.” The course began with discussions on rhetorical critiques of discourse and environment, moved on to classic texts in American environmental writing, and ended with students’ engaging in various arenas of environmentally related public discourse. Weisser explains, “These ranged from articles written for environmental activist groups such as Greenpeace, to interviews with local developers, contractors, and builders.” He recounts how one student submitted a report on environmentally responsible landscaping to local developers, while others volunteered as writers for environmental organizations, their final writings published in a classroom journal and on the Internet. I found this glimpse into his own construction of public writing pedagogy both enticing and frustrating: enticing because this thumbnail sketch hints at what seems to have been a refreshingly active and progressive classroom, but frustrating because the portrait is so fleeting. This volume could have benefited from an entire chapter devoted to Weisser’s and other colleagues’ pedagogical and curricular methods for incorporating public writing into the classroom.

The only reservation I have with this book, aside from my wish that it had been longer and was as interested in specific manifestations of contemporary public writing pedagogy as with cultural theorists’ writing on the public sphere, lies with the concluding chapter. The argument in this chapter is sound enough: because of our work in service learning, student collaboration, community literacy, and other forms of public discourse, compositionists, probably more than colleagues in other disciplines, are uniquely positioned to imagine themselves as public intellectuals. In response to the widely reported (and somewhat exaggerated) absence of public intellectualism, Weisser’s implication is that compositionists have a responsibility and the leverage to consider their research and pedagogy in a broader public context. Composition faculty—with our sustained access to a broad range of entering college students, our intimate understandings of student fears and concerns via their writings, and our “working class” academic status—possess a kind
of authority and insight perhaps less accessible to colleagues in other disciplines; as such, we ought to seriously consider public intellectualism as a logical component of our professional responsibilities. What I find curious about this final chapter is that Weisser chooses not to present these views in the context of ecocomposition, an emerging subdiscipline that he, along with Sidney Dobrin, have energetically promoted in recent years. As co-editor (with Dobrin) of *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches* (SUNY P, 2001)—a collection, I should acknowledge, that includes one of my own articles—and coauthor with Dobrin of *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition* (SUNY P, 2002), clearly Weisser's personal theorizing of public writing has been shaped in no small degree by his environmental politics. So as I read through *Beyond Academic Discourse*, appreciating Weisser's calls for composition faculty to use the work of social theorists like Habermas and Fraser to articulate their own approaches to public writing, I kept waiting for him to offer his own unique brand of public writing theory—to move beyond, say, Fraser's idea of counterpublics and extend the discussion via environmental theory. Something like this happens in his work on ecocomposition, where matters of nature, environment, and the public are always understood as interconnected, but here in *Beyond Academic Discourse* the jump to ecocomposition never happens.

It's also interesting to discover that Weisser's last chapter is reprinted almost verbatim in Weisser and Dobrin's *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition*. The only significant changes that have been made to the text are that where "intellectuals" and "radical scholars and teachers" are the operative terms in *Beyond Academic Discourse*, these have been replaced with "ecocompositionists" in *Natural Discourse*. Weisser's decision to republish the same text in two different books with minor but significant changes raises some questions. Must radical teachers also be ecocompositionists? Are the terms interchangeable? Does Weisser's interpretation of a public intellectual require a degree of environmental activism? Or can one be a radical educator while ignoring the implications of ecocomposition and ecocriticism? For that matter, which version of these two chapters should we consider to be more authoritative—the one using the word "intellectuals," or the one addressing "ecocompositionists"? *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse* would have been stronger had Weisser gone the distance and committed himself to a brand of public intellectualism and public writing inherently connected to place, environment, and discourse—something, again, that has been an objective in his other publications on ecocomposition. The omission here
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is somewhat odd, particularly given that this book and *Natural Discourse* were both released in Spring 2002 and, thus, presumably were written during the same general period of time.

Despite Weisser's decision to distance himself from ecocomposition in this manuscript, *Beyond Academic Discourse* remains useful to me for two reasons: the value of his literature review in the initial chapters, as well as the introduction of public writing as a useful rubric connecting much of contemporary work in composition. When I consider the work I admire most in composition—friends and colleagues involved in community literacy, student collaboration, oral histories, service learning, neighborhood revitalization, plus my own interests in sustainable curricula—all of this fits nicely within Weisser's overarching definition of public writing, where before I had no easy framework within which to connect these diverse impulses. It will be interesting to see how the rubric of public writing will further connect and inform composition's rich history of activist, student-centered pedagogies.


Reviewed by Robin Varnum, American International College

By "activist rhetorics," Susan Kates explains that she means studies of rhetoric that interrogate the relationship between language and identity, make civic issues a focus for discussion and writing, and emphasize the responsibility of students and teachers to engage in community service. What her protagonists—Mary Augusta Jordan of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts; Hallie Quinn Brown of Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio; and Josephine Colby, Helen Norton, and Louis Budenz of Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York—have in common is that they all struggled to help disenfranchised students find their voices. Jordan's students all were women; Brown's were African American; and those of Colby, Norton, and Budenz were men and women of the working class.

What I find most engaging about Kates' book is the use to which she puts her accounts of the activist pedagogies she has rediscovered. As her