

## Beginnings of a Polemic: Shaking the Borders of a Literate Education

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The essays in this symposium represent an extended reflection on how “literacy” might inform our work as composition scholars and teachers. While all the essays are provocative for how they position the possibilities of a sustained engagement by composition with literacy studies, I have found myself repeatedly returning to the work of Kathryn Flannery and Bruce Horner. I believe their essays offer our field a sense of how to move beyond some of the limitations of our most recent “public turn” and towards a pedagogical practice that better meets the goals of our composition classrooms and community partners.

Of course, the most recent “public turn” of the past fifteen years could be seen as a “re-turn” to a set of public commitments that announced themselves to the field most recently during the 1960s and 1970s, a period when fundamental aspects of the national political contract were being re-negotiated. In large part due to the activist work by the Black Caucus, the Latino Caucus, and other activist organizations, our national organization, CCCC, began to recast its relationship to the larger public, moving its axis from one of Cold War nationalism to a more contentious and ambivalent relationship to the public sphere (Blackmon, Kirklighter, and Parks; Davis; National Council). Within this space, new arguments were put in place about the value of the existing literacies of our students as well as what it might mean to make a public commitment to such literacies (Fleming), *The Students’ Right To Their Own Language* being a culminating point of such arguments.

The conservative restoration of the 1980’s (both politically and pedagogically) reduced this dynamic vision of composition to “literacy as identity politics,” a move premised on essentializing the identities of non-traditional students into simple tropes. In such a classroom, students were asked to turn historically-in-flux heritages into static qualities that could be stitched together under a “progressive” vision of academic literacy (Horner). Students learned tolerance, but not an enriched vision of how identities are a resting point in an endless negotiation of the current moment, a moment always occurring within a historically complex landscape. During this period, the borders between individuals, heritages, classrooms, and community were being fortified instead of explored.

Today, the “Public Turn” has come to stand for the development of community partnerships, a series of local efforts designed to reinvigorate the dynamic relationship between composition and the community, the classroom and the civic. These new commitments often characterize local literacies as if they were unique and complete systems, often quantifiable and limited in scope (Flower). In this way, as Horner correctly argues, the most recent “Public Turn” has not developed a framework which moves beyond a sense of autonomous literacy, where such literacy is seen as outside of time and place, representing a unique set of cognitive and writerly values. Within this model, each newly dis-

covered local literacy practice is also understood as “autonomous.” The literacy pantheon expands, but the analysis of each literacy remains locked within a limited theoretical model.

The danger in such a position, again echoing Horner, is that students engaged in community projects framed under this rubric learn a static sense of literacy. Rather than see any/all communities as being an ecological system of diverse literate moves, occurring across, within, and beyond shifting boundaries, students learn a fixed (and simultaneous) non-historical sense of how literacy operates in a local context. It is the equivalent of taking one literacy practice out of Cushman’s richly articulated community analysis in *The Struggle and the Tools*, separating it from its complex environment, then claiming to understand the literacy practices of a community. Clearly a different model is required.

Instead of thinking in terms of “distinct” literacies, our pedagogical goal within community partnerships should be to understand how any one “literate” moment is a resting point within a dynamic relationship between a series of diffuse literacy practices. The point is to study the *process* by which such resting places occur. Having done so, the work should then be to develop strategies that enable students and community members to negotiate amongst these multiple practices as a means to produce a more ethical and equitable literacy system.

Our classrooms, as Flannery reminds us, might still hold the promise of providing such an education to our students and, I would add, support to our local communities. Her essay reflects upon another aspect of the “public turn”—a tendency to frame “public literacies” as equal in status to “academic literacies.” While the intent of such a framing is clearly on solid political grounds, the utility of such a move is clearly questionable. Flannery asks us to consider the types of work different literacies enable and then to consider how they might join in common effort. For instance, how might the research work made possible by an academic essay be seen in alliance with the rhetorical work of a community organizer’s speech? What impact might such an alliance produce? To be effective community partners, that is, students need to understand the complex interplay made possible through the ability to shift between these different literacies, assessing their strengths, and pointing them towards a common endpoint. This could be the “literacy” work of our classrooms.

Taken collectively, then, Horner and Flannery enable us to reimagine the composition classroom as a site where our students work with the broader community to enact new collaborative literacy strategies designed to foster a greater collective good. This engagement of our students in such renegotiation, this placing them in the field of such activity, should be the work of the “public turn.” Of course doing so would necessarily also require teaching our students the skills of community organizing. For changing what counts as accepted literacy practices also means changing power structures. But, clearly, that is the topic for another essay.

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