

Rose, Shirley K., and Irwin Weiser, eds. *Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement*. Logan, Utah: Utah UP, 2010.

Reviewed by Nicole Amare

There is always a lesson to be learned. I received *Going Public* to review just as I entered my own beginning-to-burnout stage with our writing department's public engagement program between volunteer faculty and students and/or community participants. I've been coordinating the program for about a decade, and although our "numbers" are fine—many attend these free faculty-run workshops and are highly pleased (or at least their evaluations say as much) with the instruction and attention they receive from the workshop leaders—I have felt for some time a growing need for more life to be put into the program: something new, something uplifting, something amazing. We've tried new instructors, new topics, and even innovative avenues of recruiting participants for these free sessions, all of which has fanned the flickering flame . . . a little.

Although *Going Public* has not served per se as the antidote to (my) perceived program plateau, the collection does ground well the current tide of theories and applications of *community engagement*, the two-part buzz word for the type of service learning that does not suffer from power politics, namely universities aiding the public in the name of service. In their introduction, Rose and Weiser acknowledge their deference to rhetorical history and to "the service-learning movement in higher education" (1) while simultaneously asserting that their collection does not adhere essentially to the definition of *engagement* found in work done by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) but rather focuses more on how writing programs reciprocate and exchange. What exactly is exchanged, how it is exchanged, and by whom are what undergird the entire book. Rose and Weiser explain how "service-learning curricula focused on what students learned from their experiences But contemporary

engagement programs are typically driven” by how the engaged partners are able to garner new production of knowledge and to reconsider viewpoints (6-7). Through describing the back and forth of engagement within, between, among, and beyond writing programs, the authors in this collection “present a range of perspectives on what we can learn when writing programs go public” (6).

However, Rose and Weiser forewarn that their anthology is not an attempt to “survey or overview. . . writing programs’ engagement projects” (6) and that readers should look elsewhere (see, e.g., Elinore Long’s *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*) for a history of community engagement and university writing instruction. Nevertheless, despite this admonition, *Going Public* does offer a sampling of public engagement projects at university writing programs across the nation. Each chapter is, essentially, a description of said project and what the participants learned from engagement, usually over the long haul.

What’s the difference, then? *Going Public* as a work does not offer these chapters as authoritative case studies on how to “go public” with community engagement and writing instruction. In fact, the final chapter, Jaclyn Wells’s “Writing Program Administration and Community Engagement: A Bibliographic Essay” is the only essay in the text that provides a conversation about existing writing outreach projects. Wells catalogs several first-person accounts (usually from the perspective of the WPA, but not always) published after 1995 that directly link community engagement and writing programs fundamentally (239).

Therefore, Rose and Weiser argue that *Going Public* “is not intended to be a handbook or guidebook” because “it is too soon for that, as this ground for arguing for writing program designs and goals is still mostly unexplored” (5). After reading *Going Public*, I couldn’t agree more with this statement. The benefit of Rose and Weiser’s democratic approach to writing programs’ public engagement(s) is that writing programs themselves *do learn*. Although the book’s post-colonic title was initially off-putting to

me as a grammarian (after all, people learn, not programs, right?), I understand what Rose and Weiser are trying to explain, and I now prefer this title to the initial one presented in the 2007 CFP: *Going Public: The WPA as Advocate for Engagement*. Indeed, WPAs do learn from public engagement, but as Rose and Weiser's collection shows, WPAs are not the only ones involved and most certainly are not the only ones affected. Without a doubt, then, entire writing programs learn, grow, and change.

The rub while reading *Going Public* may be for those who are stagnant in their current engagement with the public and who, like me, have been too focused on the whats and the hows of the outreach program and may now need to shift gears and consider how (and why) such an outreach program could "teach" an entire department about writing, community, and meaning making—just for a start. Rose and Weiser clearly discovered and therefore changed as a result of editing this book. For instance, much of the content of their 2007 CFP sounds more focused on the how-to ("How does writing program administrators' work in these writing programs contribute to the public good?"¹), whereas the collection published by Utah State Press offers more reflection on the whys of engagement and how public sharing influences writing programs.

Although the entire collection tells stories of writing programs that learn (in one way or another), Chapter 4, Charlton and Charlton's essay "The Illusion of Transparency at an HSI: Rethinking Service and Public Identity in a South Texas Writing Program" quintessentially exemplifies how performing the engagement, while important, must be (in terms of learning) secondary to analyzing, pondering, and thus understanding the different communities involved in the engagement with the writing program, not to mention the community differences with that writing program and, most importantly, the differences within the writing program that is impeding learning. In their chapter section entitled "Engaging Opacity," Charlton and Charlton respond to the stereotype that students at an HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution) are "at risk" and see themselves as

marginalized, explaining that “we’ve seen new teachers, good teachers, time and again whip out an Hispanic anthology for their first first-year writing class because students will relate to the ‘stories’” (82). They argue that the “problem of engagement” does not always have to include a discussion of ethnicity based on a “language of lack” (82) which, ultimately, creates a highly problematic discourse of invalidation. In short, Charlton and Charlton choose to adjust the types of writing projects performed at their institution because, in their words, “we’re trying every day to not ‘know’ our students but to ask them how they want to be ‘known’” (83). Although their theoretical shift from students-as-objects to students-as-subjects seems almost cliché (as I gloss Charlton and Charlton’s chapter for a book review in a mainstream college writing journal), what I *learned* while reading this collection, and saw the chapter authors learn, was not problem-solution approaches but rather discovery and, in many cases, both personal and programmatic understanding based on a humble desire for self-consciousness and correction. Charlton and Charlton, through their physical and mental efforts at public engagement in Texas’s Rio Grande Valley, skillfully show us how the private vs. public binary “is false, and we need to neutralize it with a healthy dose of listening to what we want out of our influence and what our students want in terms of their lives as ‘public’ intellectuals” (81), a statement that summarizes most, if not all, of the learning recorded in this book.

Going Public as an anthology is, of course, not without its WPA heavy hitters: Jeff Grabill, David Jolliffe, Linda Bergmann, and Linda Adler-Kassner all have chapters in the collection and each, like Charlton and Charlton’s, express the raw (and sometimes painful) truths of what happens when writing programs engage the public or, conversely, when writing programs chose not to engage a particular group or “public.” Jolliffe’s “The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project: A Hands-On, Experiential Course on School-College Articulation” describes the loaded project of engaging articulation from high school to college. Jolliffe genuinely explains these programmatic articulation efforts as historically one-sided

and asks us: “Can articulation (or diversity, for that matter) really work if change is only moving in one direction?” (51). During University of Arkansas’s Oral History Project, several high school students struggled with the college-level collaboration, and “for some Delta students, their material circumstances seemed to conflict with the literacy practices the project was asking them to engage in” (61). In sum, the project provided epiphanies for the writing program because instead of teaching the high school students how to “write for college,” the members of the university writing program wrote *with* the high school students, an involved approach that, while frustrating (61), intimately engages.

Although there is neither time nor space here to discuss each writing programs’ revelations as recounted in *Going Public*, suffice it to say that each of the baker’s dozen chapters offers a rich, almost bildungsroman-like approach to the public engagement of these university writing programs. One such gem, Wolf et al.’s “Students, Faculty, and ‘Sustainable’ WPA Work,” critiques BAU (“business as usual”) program administrators for work that “is not sustainable and cannot lead to robust engagement or agency for the stakeholders involved—faculty, staff, or students” (142), notably if the WPA is involved in a rhetorical power struggle “against the university” (159). Again, avoiding the canned problem-solution genre approach to public engagement, Wolf et al. explain how ethically working with university administrators and students through “town hall meetings”—even after the dean cut re-assigned time for the existing WPA (158)—allowed for sustainable engagement and, additionally, reduced fatigue.

This collection’s rich montage, however, would not be complete without Rose and Weiser’s own personal reflection in their introduction, which really does invite the readers to learn, with and through all of the writing programs discussed in *Going Public*. The editors describe how contributing authors Michael Norton and Eli Goldblatt grew to “see their writing programs anew” through community engagement activities, specifically because their university-public connection served as an irritant (8). In addition to embracing and learning from these locales of

conflict, Rose and Weiser encourage us not just to anecdotally recount our stories, but to use them as points of research about personal and programmatic discovery and growth, which clearly the contributors to *Going Public* have tried so honestly and fervently to do.

Note

¹ Rose, Shirley K. "CFP: Going Public: The WPA as Advocate for Engagement." 23 July 2007. Web. WPA-L Archives.