Randy Koch

Book Review

Does Cultivating Social Action Put Writing Pedagogy Out to Pasture?

Rural Literacies
Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell
Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007. 233 pages.

Like dozens of other books published in recent years—such as Christian R. Weisser's *Moving beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, Morris Young's *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*, Mary Ellen Belfiore et al.'s *Reading Work: Literacies in the New Workplace*, and Paula Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*—this book, *Rural Literacies,* springs out of the current tradition of focusing composition studies on issues drawn from the public arena. The authors—Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell—offer yet another approach to situating composition studies in and beyond the classroom and suggest ways that compositionists can work toward social change and enlightenment by engaging their communities and students in the study of literacy, this time by focusing on rural issues. Clearly the authors' intentions are good, and their literacy work in various communities is substantial, relevant, and valuable. However, they consistently fail to support their claim that focusing a first-year college composition class on a rural issues theme—or, by extension, on any number of other themes drawn from the sphere of public literacies—is an effective approach to teaching students to write. In the end,

Copyright © 2009 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.

Rural Literacies advocates a questionable classroom pedagogy and typifies a trend in the teaching of composition that demands serious reconsideration.

Chapter 1, titled "Constructing Rural Literacies: Moving beyond the Rhetorics of Lack, Lag, and the Rosy Past," is authored by Donehower, Hogg, and Schell. Here they stipulate definitions of *rural*, *literacy*, and *rural literacy* and identify three goals of this book: (1) to analyze where—in both schools and communities—people discuss, debate, and teach issues affecting rural areas; (2) to encourage social change through participation in and establishment of rural movements intended to sustain rural life, and (3) to bring rural, urban, and suburban people together by identifying their common interests, concerns, and values. To justify selecting a "rural issues" theme for K–16 classes, they cite Julie Andrzejewski and John Alessio's five "learning objectives for global citizenship" (8). They then discuss the causes of compositionists' preference for urban literacy issues, the common perception of rural as unsophisticated and conservative, and the need for both more attention on rural areas and a critical, public pedagogy to "affect social change" and address problems of globalization. These problems, they point out, have been with us since the early 1900s and continue today with No Child Left Behind's negative effects on rural schools and local literacy. The authors list three practical ways that compositionists can, in different types of communities, change the conditions for literacy—by researching rural literacy, affecting students' thinking about rural areas and literacy, and serving as literacy sponsors by engaging and participating in rural public life—and conclude the chapter with brief descriptions of the authors' rural backgrounds and the current source of their interest in this issue.

In chapter 2, "Rhetorics and Realities: The History and Effects of Stereotypes about Rural Literacies," Kim Donehower provides an introduction to rural stereotypes and stigmatization, compositionists' classroom responsibility in understanding and addressing these stereotypes, a history of stereotyping rural literacy in the United States, and a detailed analysis of Henry Shapiro's solutions to the representation of rural illiteracy in Appalachia. She outlines media sources that perpetuate rural stereotypes and points to James Moffett's book *Storm in the Mountains* as "an excellent example" (50) of how, why, and with what results rural literacy in Appalachia was stigmatized. Donehower then describes how she conducted her own research in Haines Gap, North Carolina; how struggles over how to practice and value literacy became struggles over identity and identification; and the problems and possibilities of the relationship between the literacy sponsor and the rural community. She then lists examples of other researchers whose work favors a model of sustainability

and recommends ways that literacy sponsors and composition instructors can, in rural college classrooms, apply this practice and address the problem of stereotypes.

Eileen E. Schell in chapter 3, "The Rhetorics of the Farm Crisis: Toward Alternative Agrarian Literacies in a Globalized World," clearly defines and outlines the symptoms, causes, and consequences of the farm crisis—specifically the decline of small family farms and the rise of large corporate farms—and explains how "myth-information" (78) and the rhetorics of tragedy, preservation, and diversification prevent urban and suburban people from clearly understanding the crisis. She points out that much of this misunderstanding results from media portrayals of the farm crisis and what is left out of the typical narratives of tragedy and smart-diversification. She then contrasts these media portrayals of farmers and the farm crisis with the rhetorical strategies employed by Farm Aid on their website, which also includes some tragedy and smart-diversification rhetoric but uses it to promote rural sustainability. Schell then provides some Farm Aid examples of farmers successfully diversifying and benefiting themselves and consumers, both of whom participate in an alternative agrarian rhetoric "based on social, economic, and environmental sustainability" (118). She ends by arguing that "literacy educators at the college level can play a vital role in perpetuating critical literacies about rural life and rural issues such as the farm crisis" (118) and suggests some resources educators may find useful in this work.

In chapter 4—"Beyond Agrarianism: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Place"—Charlotte Hogg examines how traditional rural literature and scholarly work, such as Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America*, typically emphasizes the masculine perspective but ignores the vital contributions women make to literacy in their rural communities. She contrasts place-based education, which, according to Gruenewald, stresses "'ecological and rural contexts'" (128), with critical literacy, which "'emphasizes social and urban contexts'" (128) and the need to combine the best of both approaches into a critical pedagogy of place with two objectives: "decolonization" and "reinhabitation" (130). Hogg then describes the literacy activities of several Paxton, Nebraska, women and how this work helps foster a critical pedagogy of place and suggests ways that students can use these rural historical texts to think critically and as alternatives to traditional masculine agrarian writing. She ends with brief descriptions of two organizations that promote or enact a critical pedagogy of place—a Prairie Commons Center for Women in North Dakota and Rural Womyn Zone (RWZ), an online "network that seeks to critically educate rural women" (152).

Chapter 5, "Toward a Sustainable Citizenship and Pedagogy," authored by Donehower, Hogg, and Schell, examines how higher education students, especially composition students, can be exposed to rural literacies through curriculum and pedagogy and then critiques the frequent failure of composition readers not only to address rural literacy and issues (such as place-based identity) but also to provide a broad view of rural literacy and to show the connection between rural and urban people. They then describe three different composition courses designed to focus on rural literacy, one concentrating on media representation of rural people and literacies, another on food politics, and the last on place-based writing. Each description includes course rationale, possible readings, writing assignments, outcomes, and public pedagogy opportunities.

The authors argue convincingly in chapters 2, 3, and 4 that rural literacy is an appropriate and even urgent topic for academic research and ripe with opportunities for compositionists to engage in social action. However, their claim throughout the book and stated explicitly in chapter 5 that "the composition classroom offers an excellent space [. . . . where] compositionists can bring a new understanding of rural literacies" (158) ignores the more urgent needs of students and the necessity of providing genuine writing instruction in the composition class.

According to Alvin P. Sanoff's recent report titled "A Perception Gap over Students' Preparation," only 6 percent of college faculty members say that students are "very well prepared" for the demands of college-level writing, while 47 percent say they are only "somewhat well prepared" and 44 percent say they "are not well prepared" and "are inadequate writers." Despite this, the trend in composition is and has been for years to focus on nearly anything but the actual instruction of writing. In fact, in the "Rationale" and "Outcomes" sections of each of the course descriptions in chapter 5 of *Rural Literacies*, "writing" and "writing instruction" are almost never mentioned, and when they are, it is primarily to point out that "writing . . . takes place in the course" (166). The assumption seems to be—despite the data in Sanoff's report—that students already have the necessary skills and only need opportunities (i.e., writing assignments and a theme) to apply them; however, those opportunities are useful only if students have been instructed in, have been shown how to apply, and have been given practice with specific skills that will help them demonstrate *in writing* their ability to "interrogate," "complicate," and "unpack" rural issues. This is highly unlikely to occur in courses such as those described in *Rural Literacies* because, as the authors point out, the main pedagogical

justification for a rural issues theme in composition is that "students can have much to say on this topic" (163), or that it provides an opportunity for "an explicit discussion" (164) or "to study, analyze, and debate an issue of great public concern" (171), not because it is effective in teaching students to produce clear, logical, cohesive, concretely supported prose. Nowhere do the authors say or demonstrate that designing a composition course around a rural issues theme actually and measurably improves the quality of students' writing or makes them better writers.

While Donehower, Hogg, and Schell frequently provide generous specific support for their points regarding the farm crisis, rhetorical techniques used on the Farm Aid website, and the variety of literacy activities that the women of Paxton, Nebraska, contributed to their community, the authors consistently fail to support their claims regarding the pedagogical effectiveness of this rural issues approach to teaching college composition. For example, in the authors' description of the media representations composition course, they claim in the outcomes that students' "writing has demonstrated steady progression in their abilities to analyze both arguments and rhetoric and to begin to work with sources to develop and complicate ideas" (166). They do not, however, explain what exactly they mean by either "steady" or "progression," whether or not they attempted to quantify their students' progress, or how this progress compared to that achieved in composition courses that did not focus on rural literacy. In addition, stating that students "begin to work with sources" suggests they have not had the time to do more than simply "begin" since, according to the authors, "popular representations of rural regions [. . . .] is the explicit subject of much of the discussion [. . .] that takes place in the course" (166). Even more disturbing is that the outcomes for the "unit on food politics" (176) never mentions writing but focuses instead on helping "students think through the food industrial complex" (176) and "understand the network of community and global linkages that currently shape our lives as food consumers" (177). Only the outcomes for the place-based unit for college composition states that "[t]he goal of such assignments [described on the preceding two pages] is first to help students become better writers" (187). However, the authors provide no explanation of how "assignments" alone accomplish such a goal, nor do they offer any evidence that students do, in fact, become "better writers." In this unit, too, the focus of classroom discussions seems not to be on any aspect of writing but instead on the theme for the course: "seek[ing] to explore the interdependence of places" (187).

Even the authors seem to realize that their "descriptions of three different first-year composition courses" (158) give little attention to writing instruction and that readers may need to be reassured that writing process is actually part of this course because they point out that "[t]he objectives of a themed course on place do not sacrifice the emphases on drafting and revising to create complex prose in which a controlling idea dominates" (187). However, "drafting and revising" are only more "opportunities" unless accompanied by specific writing instruction and practice, and "complex" does not necessarily mean prose that is "clear," "coherent," "logical," "concise," or "engaging," qualities that students need to learn to recognize so that they can produce college-level writing. Similarly the authors point out that in the place-based unit "exploratory essays and position papers allow students to incorporate both research and their experiential knowledge" (186). These specific types of assignments may "allow" and may provide "opportunities," but the authors give no indication that students will be taught or that there will be time to teach them how to do this in the themed composition course.

In addition, imposing a theme on students has several pedagogical flaws. First, students are likely to perceive that they, their own interests, and their writing skills are less important than either the theme or the instructor's interest in the theme. Second, students get less experience selecting their own topics, a task they often consider one of the most difficult parts of the writing process because high school teachers—often out of necessity—assign topics to them. Third, students not stimulated by or engaged in the theme are likely to resent having to write about it for an entire semester and are highly unlikely to invest the time needed to produce their best work and to grow as writers. Fourth, even though the instructor can catalog the many ways in which the theme is relevant and significant to students as thinkers, citizens, and future professionals, the typical seventeen- or eighteen-year-old freshman may not care, and for some, their priorities are more likely the date or party or football game next Saturday. Last, as the authors explain in the rationale of the media representation unit, "[e]ven when our intentions are good, rural students may misinterpret our desire to genuinely connect with them" (160), which is what happened to Kim Donehower's husband. He grew up in New York and took a teaching position in a rural Kentucky school, where "he confessed to his students that he was nervous about his ability to communicate well with them as this was his first time teaching outside the northeastern United States" (160). His students took this to mean that he considered himself smart and cultured

and that he saw them as all being "stupid" (160). Had students and their writing been the primary focus of the course rather than rural issues, which his students had firsthand experience with but he did not, he would have been less likely to feel insecure about communicating with them, and they would have been much less likely to misinterpret his remark or take offense.

Having grown up on a farm in southwestern Minnesota in the 1960s and early 1970s, I value *Rural Literacies* for its close analysis of the farm crisis, the authors' engagement with proponents of rural literacy, and their efforts to educate people regarding rural issues for the benefit of all. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell demonstrate a clear understanding of these issues, a solid commitment to "work[ing] toward realities of rural literacies [. . .] that encourage mutual identification among rural, urban, and suburban citizens" and an earnest belief that "[a]ddressing these interconnected issues through [. . .] and sponsorship of literate action is the responsibility of us all" (192–93). However, having also taught composition for over seventeen years at both community colleges and universities in Minnesota, Texas, and Wyoming, I have seen how students' writing skills improve minimally and sometimes even regress when social, political, or literary issues are at the center of the freshman composition course while students, their writing, and writing instruction are on the periphery. Strangely, the tide of our profession—particularly as typified by the last chapter of *Rural Literacies*—has led compositionists to promote and pursue social action in the first-year composition classroom by focusing on and designing courses around the pressing social issues of the day. They fail to recognize, however, that by profession they are already engaged in one of the most pressing social and educational issues of this or any other time: giving freshman composition students the ability and, therefore, the lifelong power to advocate for social and professional change by teaching them to write and by making writing the center of the first-year composition course.

Work Cited

Sanoff, Alvin P. "A Perception Gap over Students' Preparation." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52.27 (2006): B9–B14.

Randy Koch

Randy Koch writes a monthly column on writing called "Serving Sentences" for *LareDOS: A Journal of the Borderlands* and has recently published poems in *Passages North*, *Texas Poetry Review*, *Measure*, and the anthology *Poetic Voices without*

Borders 2 (Gival Press, 2009). After teaching developmental writing, composition, and creative writing in Minnesota and Texas for sixteen years, he is currently pursuing an MFA at the University of Wyoming, where he also teaches composition and is researching and writing a series of dramatic monologues about the Spanish conquest of the Americas.