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Review Essay

Rhetorical Carnival

Trained Capacities: John Dewey, Rhetoric, and Democratic Practice
Brian Jackson and Gregory Clark, editors

Political Literacy in Composition and Rhetoric: Defending Academic Discourse against Postmodern Pluralism
Donald Lazere

Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Training in Anxious Times
Amy J. Wan

Not long before the Berlin Wall fell, I was in Leningrad doing critical teaching workshops for Russian educators. A dissident colleague there, Mikhail, marched me through the streets daily to witness the explosion of discourse as the Communist oligarchy collapsed. Corners and sidewalks overflowed with people handing out self-published (samizdat) materi-
als—broadsides, pamphlets, newsletters, essays, fact sheets, photos, poems, stories, and so on, previously restricted to underground circulation. My colleague filled his arms and mine with documents, declaring, “I’d rather read than eat!” Such moments of opposition, described by ethnographer James C. Scott as the popular “hidden transcript” erupting into the official “public transcript,” are rhetorical carnivals. A carnival of rhetoric is also underway as I write now in America, with the most unruly presidential campaign in over fifty years.

_Carnival_ means inverted power and unauthorized discourse, “the world turned upside down,” as Scott wrote, the bottom overtaking the top. Rhetorical carnivals are breakthroughs against limits of public discourse. Rhet/comp is a grand place to be at such moments, if we know how to use the opening in class and out, on campus and off. This unruly presidential season has seen the corporate mainstreams of both major parties disturbed by populist challenges on the right and the left. Language is at the center of this historic moment, and for us in rhet/comp who acknowledge the inescapable politics of language instruction, an opportunity to study campaign rhetoric has landed in our laps.

This opportunity to study policies, promises, and claims is helped along by the three books under review here. The first, by senior scholar Donald Lazere, confronts “political literacy” head on, building from his earlier remarkable textbook devoted to civic rhetoric. Lazere’s arguments for a pedagogy of political semantics is well suited to this moment. The second text, by Amy Wan, connects to a key controversy ignited by Donald Trump’s incendiary remarks demonizing Mexican and Islamic immigrants. Wan compares current policy and literacy dilemmas regarding immigration to those of a century ago, when foreigners entered in great numbers, provoking anxiety and language programs to manage them. Finally, the third volume is a Deweyan anthology edited by Brian Jackson and Gregory Clark, connecting well with the other two, first because its chapters cover time periods similar to Wan’s World War I era, and second because Dewey was a prime proponent of democratic education for civic participation, two values at the heart of Lazere’s and Wan’s books.

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_Political Literacy in Composition and Rhetoric_ by Donald Lazere speaks to a central theme in the books reviewed here—“how to produce good citizens through pedagogy.” Lazere’s career devotion to citizenship informed
his composition text *Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy*. His new book theorizes civic literacy while comparing his method to other approaches in the field. Lazere’s panoramic knowledge of rhetoric, composition, and attendant disciplines rewards a close reading. He advocates here a tradition-alist method with a social justice intention. Lazere muses early in *Political Literacy* about his “long-running, quixotic project for broadening college humanistic study, with rhetoric and composition at its center, to foster critical thinking about politics and mass media” (4). But Lazere is more “contrarian” than “quixotic,” rowing against two tides at once—conservative neoliberalism in school and society and dissident rhet/comp scholars advocating “difference,” personal narrative, “postmodern pluralism,” and identity politics.

Chapter 1 begins with a 1975 NCTE policy statement from the same era of CCCC’s groundbreaking “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language.” NCTE called on us to “train students in new literacy encompassing . . . critical reading, listening, viewing, and thinking skills . . . to cope with . . . persuasion . . . in political statements, advertising, entertainment, and news” (3). Forty years ago, political literacy was at the center of English education. This excerpt joins another from a Rockefeller Commission (1980) report promoting the humanities as essential for “critical judgment . . . enabling citizens to view political issues from an informed perspective,” with special responsibilities in English courses for enabling this outcome (3). Lazere’s project beginning in the 1970s has been to combine the two—political literacy and humanities—both overwhelmed since then by neoliberal campaigns for occupationalism and STEM fields.

Before the triumph of neoliberalism, insurgent activism in professional organizations was widespread. Lazere was among millions who came of age in historic mass movements. Many, like Lazere, viewed English education as an agency to accelerate democratic changes underway. Looking back, Lazere contends that such aspirations have “largely been eclipsed in composition studies over the past four decades” (3). The task of this new book, then, is to explore how rhet/comp took leave of its most important civic goals and how the field can recover its political edge.

For these tasks, rhet/comp is the ideal staging area, “the master discipline for application to every other academic field with the potential to foster civic literacy” (13). Rhet/comp is thus in a serendipitous position: language use is a universal tool for knowledge making and human subject
formation. The rhet/comp eruption of the 1970s led in many wholesome directions, one being its “epistemic” impact, more familiarly known as “writing-to-learn” from which writing-in-the-disciplines and writing-across-the-curriculum emerged as well as several kinds of critical literacy. Lazere turns this familiar “writing-to-learn” trope into a plan for critical and civic rhetoric across the curriculum so as to form students into agents for democratic change. This approach is what I think of as the “Think Big Camp” of rhet/comp, which rejects two minimal missions for language instruction: (1) first-year writing as a mere general education service course staffed by overworked, underpaid adjuncts; and (2) writing and reading as mere occupational skills to prepare students for a predatory job market. In Lazere’s big vision, first-year writing should develop rhetorical awareness and critical analysis of partisan politics, propaganda appeals, and policy issues. Students should move from such an introductory writing class to deeper rhetorical studies of language use in society.

Lazere bluntly asserts “that recent developments in English studies” distract “from effective instruction in critical thinking and civic literacy” (160). He targets “unqualified celebrations of identity politics, diversity, and difference instead of emphasis on cultural commonalities and unifying political causes; a fixation on . . . communities and cultures to the exclusion of national and international politics, and cosmopolitan cultures, and resistance to any movement toward national curricular standards” (160). He poses his program for civic reading and writing against the “postmodern pluralism” that he claims fetishizes student “difference” and “diversity” into a permissive pedagogy of identity politics. He questions “contact zone” approaches because they enforce a “safe-house” curriculum limiting a teacher’s challenges to weak or biased students. He argues that “diverseology” not only fragments unifying themes for student identity but also undermines the teacher’s right to question anything, especially outright prejudices embedded in student consciousness by the dominant culture, like among his lower-middle-class white students at Cal Poly, his career audience.

Lazere takes no prisoners in describing his students as smug in “militant factual ignorance . . . who resist and transgress critical questioning of their comfortable social status and cultural assumptions” (45–47). “[C]ompletely on the side of” the working class, women, minorities, immigrants and gays who are targets of conservative prejudice voiced by his students, Lazere directly challenges their “sheltered conservative backgrounds.”
To do this, the writing teacher must be unafraid and unbound to challenge their beliefs with argument and civic literacy. This issue has bedeviled the field—how do writing teachers contend with ideologies among their students with which they strongly disagree? For Lazere, progressive ethics require him to question such opinionating, not uttered or written by all, but a routine feature of student discourse in his classes.

His white lower-middle-class students, like working-class and poor collegians, generally have little access to critical humanities classes:

[It] is an anomalous malfunction of American education that oppositional education is accessible mainly to the privileged, whose class interests ultimately clash with oppositional consciousness. . . . [It] is mainly the leisure classes that have the money, time, and psychic energy to study liberal arts and critical thinking, and to have developed an elaborated-code psychology, extending beyond one’s immediate locale, survival needs, and self-interest. (39)

Certainly, the low-rent districts of K–12 and higher education are more vocational. Colleges from the lower middle class downward are radically tilted to occupationalism, which thus elevates the teacher’s responsibility to teach what elite academic addresses take for granted: academic discourse, argumentative rhetoric, semantic analysis, critical self-questioning, and liberal arts subjects. Lazere thus centers class inequities as the primary logarithm of school and society. Accordingly, equity requires the mass distribution of canonical liberal arts and argumentation. Lazere offers here perhaps the most strenuous call in the field for traditional academic discourse and materials being the obligatory road to mass democratization.

Traditional humanities and standard usage, when radically married with political literacy, produces a pedagogy of risk because such teaching and learning must question the very status quo they are transmitting. Lazere’s civic literacy invites students to take on social activism, but he warns most basic writing and comp teachers to avoid teaching this way (51). Those who are untenured, female, adjuncts, or nonwhite should be wary of his civic pedagogy because of the risks of high-profile critical teaching. A professor like Lazere enters the classroom marked and protected with privilege; a tenured white male in a “sufficiently secure position” (51) to risk teaching for “high-profile political literacy” (53).

The risk here emanates from the left-wing critique of the status quo; however, Lazere also advocates traditional argumentative and canonical
materials for the syllabus. This is what I would call “left-wing traditionalism.” Lazere argues for rhetoric studies, critical thinking, canonical texts, and traditional knowledges as tools for democratic empowerment because such competencies “must precede any effective cultural/political critique” and “a level of banking of factual knowledge, standards, and coercion” (117), and because “higher-order reasoning (aka critical thinking) . . . is needed to refute the logical fallacies in sexist, racist, class-biased or jingoistic rhetoric” (129). Accordingly, he multiply defends the leading proponent of core knowledge, E. D. Hirsch (81–83, 118). But, unlike Hirsch, who advocates “cultural literacy,” Lazere proposes “political literacy,” which means that knowledge is useful when it empowers students to question the status quo.

Lazere also endorses Freire’s generative theme method, which enacts problem-posing dialogue through subject matters from everyday life and mass media (132–33). But his big guns defend the liberal arts and academic argumentation. On the one hand, his kind of critical teacher must confront the oppressive ideologies already embedded in and expressed by students because of the unequal status quo from which they emerge; on the other hand, Lazere’s critical teacher in the majoritarian classrooms of higher education must instruct students in the power discourses already established as authoritative. Thus, Lazere’s program for civic literacy involves the mass distribution of powerful cultural capital never intended for them, a kind of Promethean task, where “the master’s tools” can undermine the master’s house when wielded from below.

Consider Lazere, then, as twice a contrarian—first by embracing canons and discourses beyond which diverse opposition groups in rhet/comp have moved, and second by insisting that such an embrace is indeed a road to the social justice sought by those opposition groups: “the history of western universities, intellectual culture, and the literary and humanistic canon, so facilely derided by postmodern populists, has been variegated and contested between dominant cultural forces and those of dissent, reform, even revolution” (106).

Lazere’s later chapters discuss attendant disciplines from which rhet/comp has learned much vis-à-vis how students develop: sociolinguistics, social psychology, developmental psychology, moral development, political socialization, social class theory, and so on. He reviews “the authoritarian personality” to help explain why his own lower-middle-class white students reject critical thinking about the status quo. His own autobiography is
imbricated here because he emerged from the same white lower middle class as his Cal Poly students. From Camus to Hoggart to C. Wright Mills to Bernstein to Labov to Gouldner to Bourdieu to Ehrenreich, the giants of his own formation left him with an inescapable civic responsibility for intellectuals—who are "the best remaining hope for progressive politics" (246) because they have an ethical task to educate as many people as possible against narrow prejudices dominating the status quo (163). But perhaps most controversial in a time when insurgent rhet/comp discourse focuses on subalterns at the margins, Lazere appeals for rhet/comp to pay more attention to the white lower middle class (his own origins in Des Moines), which is a major demographic cohort among college students: “What is called for is not pedagogy of the oppressed but pedagogy of those who support the oppressor—exposing them to arguments for why they perhaps should stop worshipping the rich and socioeconomic policies that oppress the poor” (275). He reiterates his affinity with Michael Halloran’s model of early schooling, "a conservative . . . eighteenth-century rhetoric-based curriculum in American education which addressed students as political members of society with responsibility to form opinions and influence public issues” (297).

Lazere concludes with the hope that “this and my other suggested topics . . . will confirm that ‘conventional’ academic study can well be turned toward critique, not enforcement, of the social status quo” (284). His case is a well-argued challenge to those who are forging ahead on other roads for rhet/comp. Lazere is a brilliant interlocutor who compels opponents to be at their very best.

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Taking a historical journey, Amy J. Wan studies literacy and citizenship in early twentieth-century America, an age like ours with "profound economic change and the uses of education through literacy as a mass strategy to shape citizenship”(3). Well-researched and finely written, Wan’s Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Training in Anxious Times asks: How did various social agents (government, labor, and formal education) define “producing good citizens” via literacy instruction just before and just after World War I? Wan focuses critically on how coercive examples of citizenship production through literacy, such as the productivity imperatives found in Americanization programs set in motion
by the Bureau of Naturalization in 1916 or the push for political power in union education around World War I or the arguments about the utility of English as a discipline forwarded by a newly formed NCTE in the 1910s and 1920s, can be placed alongside today’s current liberatory scenarios and can help us better understand how literacy acts as a mechanism in the process of citizenship production, and conversely how conceptions of citizenship shape literacy and literacy training. (8)

There is a contradictory core here different from the contradictory core of Lazere (using traditional humanities and rhetoric to undermine traditional power relations). For Wan, coercive literacy programs can be contradictorily enabling: “The role of literacy in providing access to citizenship is simultaneously coercive and empowering” (9). She contends that mainstream Americanization programs promoted literacy for personal advancement via jobs and civic markers such as voting, while labor-based programs focused on turning workers “into good citizens of the country and good citizens of the union” (9), members whose advancing skills advanced all in the union. From this initial dichotomy of “individualism” versus “solidarity,” she moves to a largely skeptical portrait of Americanization as a process for pacifying allegedly disorderly immigrants while failing to level the social inequities subordinating them.

Federal Americanization programs and labor literacy programs had incompatible goals—one to assimilate immigrants into docile, reliable employees who come to work sober, washed, and on time, while the other socialized union members as communal labor advocates. Wan argues that both were defective because both had “narrow” and “restrictive” goals, and both espoused only “vague liberatory and equalizing possibilities” (10). Neither articulated credible maps to either prosperous, secure employment or to social empowerment through labor action. Wan sees a similar failure in the third site examined, literacy and citizenship via writing instruction in schools and colleges, also promising more than was delivered via reading and writing. She puzzles over the predominant, persistent, unproven faith in the good effects of language instruction, an undocumented belief in the transformative effects of reading and writing, which she skeptically names “literacy hope” (7).

Wan’s skepticism is a foundational claim of New Literacy Theory, which emerged in the field around 1980. She references Deborah Brandt and Harvey Graff, especially Graff’s masterwork The Literacy Myth, questioning
literacy’s transformative consequences. To Wan, the key to literacy promising more than it delivers lies in the framework of “good citizen,” a signifier meaning different things to different groups. To address the unstable signifier of “good citizen,” she adds a characterizing adjective to citizenship—“ambient citizenship.” Ambient characterizes how easily citizenship (Wan calls it a “superterm” [17]) travels and shifts to add weight and approval to literacy programs claiming civic outcomes from their process:

The capacious nature of the term “citizenship” contributes to a lack of attention to concrete civic goals and allows for the term’s too-infinite flexibility, allowing the public good of citizenship to stand in for any number of values that are more economically than critically motivated. (19)

A century ago, literacy designated an immigrant as citizenship-worthy. Such citizen production, Wan observes, reveals a nation’s ideals as well as its anxieties and prejudices. On the one hand, there is documented legal citizenship, a paper certification that can be officially earned or unofficially obtained (bought, forged, or stolen). Documentation provides access to some privileges, whether the bearer is a “good citizen” or a “bad citizen,” so literacy programs can’t truly certify what kind of moral subject they produce, or even that literacy encourages morality. Thus, while producing a “good citizen” may be good public relations, Wan argues a more interesting complication, namely, that documented citizenship competes with “cultural citizenship,” that is, a social status rather than a legal one.

Cultural citizenship can be achieved with or without documentation. Cultural citizenship in communities, families, and employments enables the documented and undocumented to construct identities through everyday routines of making a living and making a life. Such “literacy” is socially situated, context-bound, historically dependent, locally encumbered, and nonformal and informal in its functional enactment. Cultural citizenship comprises the existential terrain where immigrants and others actually make lives, larger than legal “citizenship” though affected by it. Wan convincingly locates cultural citizenship in the unsettled early 1900s, when citizenship crossed paths with literacy programs: “The early decades of the twentieth century were marked by changes in immigration law, labor unrest, and the rise of a mass manufacturing economy, a world war, an international Communist threat, and U.S. imperialism, all of which created anxieties about citizenship. . . . In this period of contested citizenship . . .
educational spaces attempted to define and construct their students as 'the right' kind of citizen with the 'right' kind of literacy. . . . [E]ncompassing civic, intellectual, cultural, and vocational goals, the production of the citizen remains an uncontroversial leitmotif in the rhetoric surrounding educational objectives” (3–16).

Chapter 2 is a fascinating exploration of federal Americanization programs viewed through primers produced by the Bureau of Naturalization with help from the Department of Education. "Anxiety about the state of the citizenry” (39) led to a citizenship movement including nativists concerned about Communist leanings and job competition arriving with the million-plus foreigners each year. Americanization primers were one tool to domesticate newcomers, but so were new restrictive laws like the Literacy Test Act of 1917 mandating multilingual tests to determine immigrants worthy of entry to the United States. Wan does strong discourse analysis of the themes, stories, and models presented by the primers as efforts to alphabetize the immigrants into compliant workers and docile citizens. For example, the primers angelically disguise the unrelenting work discipline of this era as patient, polite, and friendly exchanges between employees and owners. For Americanizers, Wan reveals, literacy became an autonomous marker of immigrant commitment "to habits of citizenship beyond voting and . . . self-government,” a generic sign of compliance and manageability persisting to this day (42). She uncovers the bizarre condition of some immigrants being marked as "too literate”; those immigrants were suspect, as seen in the Red Scare of the 1910s and 1920s (42). Americanization, then, was not about mere “legal citizenship,” but rather about “cultural citizenship,” “sorting” behaviorally preferred candidates from those deemed not likely to become ‘good’ Americans (43).

Primers helped manage citizenship when a vast increase in foreigners entering the United States included a demographic shift from Northern Europeans to Southern and Eastern Europeans. Critical literacy, as rhet/comp calls it, was offered by some union-based programs, 1910–1929. Unions offered education that embedded citizenship and literacy but with different goals, methods, and materials than the federal program. Wan questions why “labor leaders promoted education as a strategy over other labor tactics and focused on the cultivation of educated worker-citizens over strikes, work slowdowns, and more overt tools for labor reform” (73). This is an important question vis-à-vis how subordinates in society gain
power. History records violent labor-management strikes, conflicts, and even an armed insurrection of miners in West Virginia in 1921, most of which tapered off by the mid-1920s. Because the narratives of these strikes are not central to her study, Wan emphasizes the unions’ perspective of “education as a way to shape a specific kind of good citizen . . . that would help advance labor reform and other worker issues” (73). The union programs aimed “to supplement the public education union members did or did not have; to cultivate a working-class consciousness; to foster leadership for the union; to cultivate organizing skills . . . ; to . . . analyze the emerging economic structure, . . . and to allow workers to become as educated as the bosses, therefore leveling the playing field” (73). The labor emphasis on literacy and citizenship positioned citizens as labor advocates: “literacy was used to shape a labor-oriented citizen that was quite different from the compliant worker the federally funded literacy programs for immigrants were designed to construct” (75).

Wan reports that labor programs were marginalized in the 1920s, a disastrous decade for labor, which she traces to internal dissension and external pressure forcing a retreat from liberatory ideas. The sectarian split in unions between radicals and conservatives, between Socialists and Communists, was destructive at that time, as Wan says. In this portrait, she lightly touches on the repression of labor organizations and radicals by government and business in this period, when police, sheriffs, national guard, army troops, thugs, and vigilantes attacked striking unions and radicals.

The story of literacy and citizenship in high schools and colleges during this period is less dramatic than the contrast of federal versus union programs for immigrant adults. Wan links college-bound high schoolers with adult immigrants through “a culture of aspiration,” all aspiring to more skills and a better life. However, the college-going population was far smaller than the millions of immigrant illiterates arriving yearly in the 1910s. Small in number, American collegians then were already literate and for the most part already citizens in the legal and cultural senses. They had secure places in the American folkways and possessed English-language literacy; collegians could already read and write and were coming to college in the 1920s in increasing numbers because industrial development opened professional and scientific careers for which colleges assumed certification. College writing classes were gatekeepers for students with professional goals; colleges prepared them for middle-class occupations.
In contrast, federal and union literacy programs were not vocational, not leading to specific employment despite frequent claims of producing good workers. Colleges at this time absorbed upwardly mobile secondary graduates en route to management, technical, and scientific futures, not factory, office, or shop work.

College mission statements reference civic purposes of forming good citizens in “a discourse of public responsibility” (118), yet Wan adds that “[t]he presence of citizen-making as an explicit goal of higher education is not nearly as present in the World War I and Progressive era as it was in the years after World War II. . . . In the early twentieth century . . . higher education was not seen as the means to gain democracy and equality in the same way that twenty-first century students and teachers might see it. . . . For the most part, higher education was still reinforcing an upper-class version of the citizen, but there begins to emerge some elements of general citizenship production” (118).

This chapter is patient research vis-à-vis early debates within *English Journal*, the official voice of the young NCTE, and other sources. The pedagogy debates at both secondary and college levels make this a valuable time for compositionists to examine, because the theories and practices in contention have a strangely contemporary ring. Wan also sees this period prefiguring our own era’s concerns with immigration, citizenship, and fast-changing labor markets (145, 147). The vocationalizing of mass education is reaching a zenith now, with career, technical, and professional education for STEM jobs overwhelming the liberal arts. Colleges still proclaim their missions to produce productive citizens, but the framework now is “global citizen.” Wan is skeptical of this tilt toward vocationalism: “Higher education thus establishes itself as an institution attempting to produce certain kinds of good citizens through curricular changes, although the efficacy of such changes is far from proven” (155). Writing instruction in the globalized university is now supposed to develop “twenty-first century” communication skills, but Wan suggests that success in this undertaking is most likely to be measured by the employability of graduates, “thus undermining the possibility of a fully realized political citizenship” (156).

Wan concludes that compositionists a century ago “used citizenship as a way to demonstrate connections between the work they did and more general societal concerns about the health of citizens” (138). Writing instruction, integrated with citizenship production, becomes “cultural
management” (146): “The values that we impress upon our students when we make calls for citizenship are not neutral, and this should be acknowledged” (147). Throughout, Wan is skeptical of “literacy hope” underlying official claims. She cites W. W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson on the vocational capture of education where “civic and moral goals of liberal education” are marginalized. There is a critical edge here that would benefit from a robust framing of neoliberalism overtaking school and society in the last thirty-five years.

Wan’s conclusion briefly engages neoliberalism regarding the DREAM Act’s legal path to citizenship for undocumented minors with GEDs or high school diplomas. Wan, though, questions using literacy or educational success as proof of an individual’s worthiness for citizenship. She cites two cases of undocumented young people, both hard working and reliable, but one fortunately helped by sponsors to become an award-winning journalist while the other labored as an underpaid, unsponsored waitress. Wan suggests that both deserve paths to citizenship because both are pulling themselves up, the American imperative, while only one had good fortune. A citizenship path based on literacy, education, and certified success will not favor all striving immigrants equally.

Wan writes that linking citizenship to educational or literate success is a “neoliberal focus” on individual achievement when such success is harder because of rising college costs and student debt, especially for immigrants in low-wage jobs. The story comes full circle here, ending where it began a century earlier, in the terrain of economic inequality upon which the feet of literacy and citizenship walk.

“Every once in a while, long-dead and oft-forgotten philosophers rise from their graves and walk their way into public conversations,” begin Brian Jackson and Gregory Clark in the introduction to their edited collection, Trained Capacities: John Dewey, Rhetoric, and Democratic Practice. They are invoking John Dewey to advance “democratic culture,” which they consider an “essentially rhetorical way of life,” involving “responsible expression” where people are accountable to others (1, 2). They “want to explore how John Dewey’s scholarship has influenced and can continue to influence thinking . . . on the relationship between rhetoric and American democracy.” Second, they want “to establish Dewey as an essential source for . . .
teaching others how to compose timely, appropriate, useful, and eloquent responses to . . . contentious rhetorical situations,” and finally, to invite a “collaboration among rhetoricians of various disciplines . . . particularly . . . in English and communication studies” (3–4).

Democratic culture “is rhetorical culture since democratic culture is created through rhetorical back-and-forthness. . . . Deliberation springs from and creates democratic culture” (5). Deliberative discourse requires mass rhetorical literacy for an open society. Trained capacities is Dewey’s signifier for rhetorical abilities to build public spheres of robust democracy. As the editors declare, Dewey “believed that the ultimate good is the growth of a person as he or she interacts in social situations, building ‘social intelligence’ and ‘social power’ through ‘trained capacities of control’” (7). The stakes are thus high, especially in universally required, first-year composition:

[W]e must embrace our roles as teachers of trained capacities such as invention, argument, style, storytelling, collaboration, figurative reasoning, debate, multimodality, arrangement, and contingent thinking. . . . Arguably, one of the most important courses a student takes in college is either a speech or writing class. . . . The more experiences we give students to inhabit and respond to rhetorical situations, the better they will develop the trained capacities for social power. (20)

This hortatory appeal echoes Lazere’s claim that rhet/comp should center the collegiate curriculum around language study for political literacy. It also repeats the central meme of Wan’s study, “producing good citizens.” We have here a coven of texts countering the occupational undermining of the liberal arts, perhaps a rhetorical carnival in the making.

The editors proclaim that “human potential is best realized in the free flow of artful communication among the individuals who together form a dynamic social organism. Because in America people are, at least in principle, more or less equal, each is responsible to be ever learning, ever growing, ever adapting to the problems that develop when diverse . . . individuals . . . construct and maintain their society” (4). Dewey emphasized collaboration and cooperation as foundational to democratic process and to mutual problem solving, at work or in the political realm, so Jackson and Clark rightfully speak about teachers developing students’ “trained capacities” (what Dewey also called “agencies for doing”) as the rhetorical contribution of education to democratic practice.
In the first essay, scholars William Keith and Robert Danisch report that "scientific thinking, for Dewey, was a refinement . . . of ordinary problem solving by a community. There was no difference in kind between scientific thinking and ordinary popular problem solving" (27). Keith and Danisch democratize Dewey’s scientific method, which is a learning process suited for common deliberations as well as for laboratory exegesis. Dewey represented scientific method as a learning discourse, situated to the conditions of inquiry, “a sociology of rhetoric” that “attempts to understand and explain how, on the one hand, social structures are products of specific communicative acts and how, on the other hand, those social structures affect human attitudes, actions, and beliefs by conditioning the kinds of communicative practices available to us as agents within larger groups” (29).

Disciplinary experts have their expert speech communities through which they practice their specialized scientific method while the great mass of people practice their version of scientific discourse. Keith and Danisch differentiate this distinction into “science₁” and “science₂.” Science₁ is the way professional scientists work with methods and discourses. Science₂ is the inquiry of nonprofessionals in reflective discussions of any sort. This distinction offers a nuanced Deweyan rhetoric even though Dewey rarely spoke of rhetoric per se. Scientific method increases the trained capacity to undertake successively deeper inquiry: “To come to know or understand a subject matter is at the same moment to gain skill in developing relationships and communication skills that allow for solving problems and decision-making” (38). According to Keith and Danisch, both kinds of scientific discourse deploy invention (strategies, tools, techniques, and heuristics to make something knowable) and arrangement (how to organize the knowledge invented), two curricular activities very familiar to compositionists. This is another way to represent first Lazere’s notion of rhet/comp as a tool for developing general political literacy among students of all majors and second the designation of speech or discourse communities in any major field through which specialists converse.

Ensuing chapters compare Dewey to an eminent rhetorician, Kenneth Burke; a national icon, Thomas Jefferson; and public intellectuals, Jane Adams, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter Lippman, and James Baldwin. Discussing Burke and Dewey, Scott R. Stroud uses the concept orientation to relate their convergence. Orientation is “the deep-seated habituation of an organism toward its environment” (48), the local forces shaping subjects at sites
of origin. To Stroud, Dewey uses orientation as a synonym for mind if we understand mind as a verb and not a noun; orientations lead us to mind our experiences in certain ways, to make certain judgments, choices, and moves from motives developed in experience. Phrased comparably by Burke, “orientation integrally involves the ability to see events as like other events (such as past events), as well as the ability to match up means relevant to certain interest-driven goals in a given situation” (51). Both concur that mind “is not a substance” but rather a “culturally formed orientation toward the range of experiences we undergo” (56). We know a person’s mind by what he or she does and says.

Stroud then questions how human differences emerge if orientation subjects people in similar locales to similar formative experiences. On the restrictive potential of orientation, Stroud proposes that “Dewey pushes flexibility and openness in orientation, but the question is always how to achieve this. Part of Dewey’s answer is education—ways of forming individual interaction and habits of problem solving that are democratic in a deep communal sense” (60). Thus, Stroud centers Deweyan freedom in pedagogical practices enabling democratic development. For Burke, according to Stroud, the answer is more a singular verbal performance: “Burke’s solution to the hardening of orientation . . . was his ‘perspective by incongruity.’ . . . When any orientation becomes so entrenched that breaking free of it may be beneficial, Burke recommends acts of linguistic ‘impiety’ . . . , violating existing expectancies of standard orientation for the sake of orientational change” (60–61).

Jeremy Engels then shows Dewey reaching back to Jeffersonian idealism for faith in democracy as fascism triumphed in Europe. Dewey’s public role in wartime began earlier in the lead-up to World War I. Unlike many labor activists and socialists in America who paid heavy prices to oppose the war, Dewey wholeheartedly supported American entry:

He believed that the United States was special and that, entering the war without interest or preconception, it was impervious to the emotions that rage in the populace at war—the emotions of fear, hatred, and anger. . . . Thus, Dewey was genuinely surprised at how quickly the tide turned sour. For a brief time, the United States became a police state as free speech was curtailed and dissenters including Eugene Debs were thrown in jail. (90)

Not “brief,” unfortunately, I would add, police state tactics were continual against labor and black communities before and after 1917. Engels reveals
that state and vigilante attacks on antiwar protesters shocked Dewey, moving him to pacifism between the wars. Dewey in the 1930s then turned to Thomas Jefferson for faith in democracy in dark times: “If war was coming, . . . Dewey strove to find an intelligent grounding for democracy—an ontological, prepolitical foundation that would keep Americans from straying too far from the democratic cause . . . . This foundation was historical; it was Thomas Jefferson” (94) who represented to Dewey “demophilia” or faith in the people to get it right, against “demophobia,” which Dewey attributed to Alexander Hamilton and other aristocratic founders (97). It seems, though, that Dewey misjudged both wars—too eager for the first wrong one and too reluctant for the second right one. Though critical of Dewey, Engels lets the Jefferson moment pass when we need sober reflection on the smartest renowned figures being wrong.

The next four chapters compare Dewey to such public figures as Jane Addams, W. E. B Du Bois, and Walter Lippman, and the much-junior James Baldwin. Louise W. Knight’s essay on the intense Dewey-Addams debate on World War I repeats Dewey’s strong support for intervention, “but his old and good friend Jane Addams, the political activist who would later become the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, did not. When she defended herself and other pacifists as ‘patriots’ in a speech that received national attention, John Dewey took up his rhetorical cudgels” (106–7). Addams, a colleague with Dewey since 1894 and a deep pacifist, argued that such conflicts were merely stages to act out personal interests and antagonisms. Dewey, as Knight reads the dispute (110–11), argued from an Hegelian faith in human reason that major conflicts could enable societal growth. Earlier, though, Dewey had moved to Addams’s pacifism but changed as German submarines sank ships in the Atlantic. Dewey pivoted to a pro-war stance. “With some fancy philosophical footwork,” Knight observes sardonically, Dewey proposed that good could come of war. In 1916, he proposed that “force” and “violence” are not the same: “This allowed him somewhat remarkably to conclude that not all wars were ‘violent’” (112). Knight dissects Dewey’s weak claim that “violent” wars were only those that led to “excessive” results of “waste and loss” while “force” is pursuing desirable results efficiently (112). To Knight, pro-war Dewey “lost” this debate with antiwar Addams and eventually “understood that he had been swept away in war enthusiasm” (119). Knight calls Dewey’s rhetoric “sophistry.” Dewey would go on to another awkward moment when Nazi
advances in Europe found him clinging to the pacifism he reactively adopted in the 1920s. Perhaps needed in Knight’s analysis is a third position distinct from Dewey’s pro-war support for Wilson and Addams’s antiwar pacifism. Left-wing opponents of World War I had been arguing that it was a rich man’s war fought with workingman’s blood. Only two socialist parties in the famed Second International opposed their national governments going to war, the Italian and the American, after which both experienced police state suppression. Opposing war as a feature of class hierarchy is missing in the dualism of the Addams-Dewey dispute.

Rhet/comp scholar Keith Gilyard (in “John Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois, and a Rhetoric of Education”) reports that Dewey and Du Bois had but thin connection. Gilyard nevertheless bravely composes rhetorical convergence by abstracting three agendas or “creeds” regarding education and democracy. The first agenda is from Dewey (1897), the second from Du Bois (1908), and the third a synthesis of the two positions. This invents a credible discourse of convergence in these eminent contemporaries whose writings contain little reference to rhetoric per se or to each other, though both were deeply involved in education.

Both addressed the 1909 National Negro Conference, which evolved into the NAACP. Yet, Gilyard writes that Dewey and Du Bois “circled each other” with minimal interaction:

Dewey made an understated, utilitarian presentation about racism, decrying the loss of social capital it entailed… [and] expressed a key statement against still-influential theories of biological determinism. Yet his remarks were more about the potential for social opportunity than about forceful advocacy for it. To the contrary, Du Bois bluntly called for aggressive antiracist action…. Indeed Du Bois would become increasingly frustrated with Dewey’s expression of ethical-democratic vision given its decoupling from the sort of spirited confrontation with white supremacy that he favored. (130)

Two decades later, Dewey’s reticence on racism disappointed Du Bois again at a founding convention both men attended for a third party. Du Bois “soon scaled back his own involvement because of the group’s unwillingness to place aggressive antiracism on its action agenda” (131).

Gilyard also critiques Dewey’s evasion of white supremacy in the 1916 masterwork Democracy and Education. Not directly addressing the racist exclusion of blacks, Gilyard maintains, Dewey’s education policies left
racism undisturbed. Gilyard follows Cornel West’s demand to center the treatment of dark-skinned peoples and their unmet needs: “[E]ven Dewey’s concise reworking of his views in the 1938 *Education and Experience*, his last major statement on education, does not . . . overtly address racial injustice” (132). It is not surprising, then, that the third rubric Gilyard abstracts to synthesize their commonalities is described by Gilyard himself as “admittedly somewhat contrived” (137). Perhaps, then, the real contribution of this chapter is to spotlight another of Dewey’s lacks, standing too far from the terrible conditions for black folks, which Walton Muyumba’s following chapter also confirms in comparing Dewey to James Baldwin.

Part 3 addresses Dewey as a “Teacher of Rhetoric.” A strong chapter by Nathan Crick connects ancient Sophists to Deweyan experimental education, because both “viewed knowledge as an active, ongoing form of inquiry whose origin was found in problematic situations”; both believed “that our interest in ‘theory’ almost always grows out of an initial interest in ‘practice’ . . . [and] that we became more intelligent by learning how to act democratically” (178). To Crick, such rhetoric “can contribute to the maintenance of civic life in the way already expressed by contemporary critical pedagogy . . . [and] in the teaching of experimental habits of mind within a laboratory classroom” (179).

Moreover, Crick disdains inert “contents” filling class hours, such as “civics . . . whereby one learned the three branches of government and the mechanisms of voting and representation” (186). Overall, Dewey “realized that the problem of education was never about an information deficit, even if that information seemed directly relevant to matters of social justice. The problem of education was a thinking deficit” (191). Memorizing limits the most important capacities students can acquire such as “intelligent habits of thought and action,” which enable critical thinking. “The goal, then, is to begin with the familiar but problematic situations that naturally call out for inquiry into more complex subject matter with which to construct the solution, ideally producing interest in the subject matter” (185). To use social-experiential materials well, Crick turns to Dewey’s advice on teaching: “a large part of the art of instruction lies in making the difficulty of new problems large enough to challenge thought, and small enough so that, in addition to the confusion naturally attending the novel elements, there shall be luminous familiar spots” (185).
The next consequential chapter in this section is by Donald C. Jones: “Dewey’s Progressive Pedagogy for Rhetorical Instruction: Teaching Argument in a Nonfoundational Framework.” Here, Jones faces the daunting instructional task of merging formal subject matters with student experience, which Dewey referred to as the principles of “interaction and continuity” (217). Dewey, decades before Freire’s negative metaphor of the “banking” model of pedagogy, denied that knowledge “is a brick that can be passed ready-made from teacher to student” (218) or an elixir that can be “poured” into student minds. Critical reflection on a problematic feature of experience starts an inquiry whose goal is organized knowledge (222). Jones sees this method requiring academic materials to be experientially framed; that is, “adapted to engage students in the progressive construction of knowledge” (223). In the end, Jones sees Deweyan rhetoric as teaching teachers to avoid “the twin perils of foundationalism and permissiveness” (231), which name two issues of central concern to pedagogy in rhet/comp and end the volume on a strong note.

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Do these books suggest rhetorical carnival? If carnival is the world turned upside down in discourse and power relations, then we already have in our hands tools for effecting reversals, namely, critical pedagogies and critical discourses of public contention. Lazere argued for political literacy developing civic activism. Wan questioned what it means to produce “good citizens” through literacy programs. Jackson and Clark’s volume proposed Deweyan and Freirean practices for training capacities of critical reflection and action. Fifty years ago, dissent grew so large it engulfed school and society in carnival, including the vast field of writing instruction. Today, a disruptive presidential season breathlessly upends the rules, with populism on the right and the left disturbing the status quo, inviting us yet again to make a carnival of rhetoric for an era of change long overdue.

Works Cited


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