A robust conversation surrounds the purpose and subject matter of first-year composition (FYC). Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs, for example, have argued that the proper subject is writing studies itself, offering a textbook with this focus, Writing about Writing: A College Reader. Wardle and Linda Adler-Kassner are currently leading a groundbreaking effort to define threshold concepts for academic writing and incorporate them in FYC, in a forthcoming work titled Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts and Composition Studies. In the pages of TETYC, Teresa Thonney, Michael J. Michaud, and many others (including me) have delved into academic discourse and transfer theory to better connect the content of FYC to the rest of college and the professional world.

Very little, if any, of this conversation informs Susan Anker’s Real Writing Interactive: A Brief Guide to Writing Paragraphs and Essays, and its accompanying software, LearningCurve. That is not to say that they are poorly constructed; on the contrary, they are well crafted and will readily find a market. However, they do not represent a rethinking of writing instruction or a significant challenge to the content or structure of FYC.

Anker’s guide is slim and direct: about 250 pages and, at the time of this writing, around $40 new, or much cheaper as a Kindle edition. It is visually traditional in its text-heavy design and organization, with major sections devoted to prewriting, writing, and editing. Writing is approached modally—narration, illustration, description, classification, and so on.

The text contains many positive aspects. For example, I was struck by an exercise where students were asked to recast an informal text message to a friend into a more formal email to a professor. This and other exercises are well constructed and show an awareness of the textual and social environments of today’s students. The book also provides copious examples of professional writing, including memos, emails, nursing case narratives, and other types of workplace writing, as well as samples of student essays and articles originally published on websites and in magazines or newspapers.

The subtitle of the book mentions both paragraphs and essays, and this duality is born out in its pages. For each major writing assignment, Anker provides a clear chart that compares the organization of a sample paragraph employing the genre at hand to a sample essay. I appreciated that
Anker gave examples of shorter forms of writing. Many students appreciate clear, prescriptive structures. However, too much direction does not encourage metacognition or genre analysis, two activities that current research strongly suggests facilitate knowledge transfer across disciplines (for more on this, see *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 37.1 [2009]). Additionally, no list of genres or modes is comprehensive enough to contain all the forms of writing our students will encounter after they leave our classes. Rather than teach modes, we should teach students to analyze examples of writing for genre characteristics and make conscious decisions about how to structure their own writing. Anker’s book does not leave room for this.

The accompanying software, LearningCurve, also takes a traditional approach. It is organized modularly, with units covering grammatical principles such as fragments, parallelism, comma usage, and active versus passive voice. Instructors choose which activities to assign, and they can set a benchmark score for students to pass the activity. For example, if the instructor assigns the module on sentence fragments, students may be challenged to identify the complete sentence among a list of fragments. They can select the answer, get a hint, or click “show me,” which provides the answer and an explanation. The “hint” is a definition of the grammatical principle, sometimes with examples. The questions get more difficult as the module progresses, and the instructor can easily track each student’s progress. Instructors can use LearningCurve linked with *Real Writing Interactive*, or they can use it as a stand-alone package. Currently, access costs around $10.

Teaching grammar is tricky. (See Blaauw-Hara, “Mapping,” for an overview of how it has been treated in these pages.) Bedford/St. Martin’s provides a research rationale for LearningCurve’s effectiveness on their website, but it centers on general learning principles rather than grammar instruction. Still, the software may be worth a try. The design is easy to understand, and I like how it encourages students to work toward mastery through repetition with support. I would see it as being most effective as an out-of-class supplement to more rhetorically focused individualized instruction.

All in all, Anker’s book and the LearningCurve software are worth a look, especially for instructors who have more traditionally oriented writing courses. The low cost of LearningCurve as a stand-alone package makes it particularly attractive. However, my hope is that the research I cited above makes its way into textbooks sooner rather than later, challenging and expanding the ways we define the purposes and content of FYC.

**Works Cited**


In his recent work, *After the Public Turn*, Frank Farmer asserts that capitalism’s consumptive powers and hegemonizing voice have taken over both the classroom and our discipline. He suggests that composition has trumped rhetoric in our current practice—that, in essence, we have been composed by neoliberal forces—and notes that while we may pride ourselves in believing that we’re a discipline that honors the marginalized, a more candid self-reflection will reveal that subaltern views have been silenced.

Farmer traces three distinct “turns” in composition theory: the social turn of the 1980s, the cultural turn of the 1990s, and the public turn of the present. Like Steve Parks, Bruce Herzberg, Patricia Bizzell, Linda Flower, and many others, he appreciates the energy of the public turn and the way that it has created community partnerships and organized movements toward community literacy. However, like these scholars, he points to what these partnerships lack: what Parks calls “the potential of oppositional rhetoric” (203). Farmer suggests that while our turn to the public gave us a foundation for democratic praxis, our discipline allowed itself to be consumed instead.

In part 1 of the book, “Cultural Publics,” Farmer shares his concern that we only allow our students to see in “officially approved ways” (29) when we assign traditional genres for student writing. He wants us, instead, to provide genres that are vehicles for change, and he offers the zine as one example of a more democratic form. While zines are not new, Farmer argues that they demonstrate the DIY spirit, providing an opportunity for writers to take available tools and frameworks and reconstruct them, thereby responding in novel ways. The zine, he argues, “reject[s] the trap-pings of consumerist capitalism and its accompanying vision of a putative ‘good life’” (37). Chapter 2 further develops this idea, moving beyond the idea of...
zine as cultural artifact to zine as cultural public: “a cultural public [is] any social formation, established primarily through texts, whose constructed identity functions, in some measure, to oppose and critique the accepted norms of the society in which it emerges” (56).

Part 2 of Farmer’s work, “Disciplinary Publics,” moves from our student population and their needs to the challenges the public turn poses for faculty. Chapter 3 begins by asserting that we are like our students, in that the public turn “is concomitantly a search for the forms by which going public may be legitimized” (102). The final chapter of the book brings the conversation back to the reader in a very direct way. Farmer asks, what has happened to composition and rhetoric’s rejoinder to voices such as Stanley Fish, Louis Menand, and Heather MacDonald? These voices—voices that originate outside composition and rhetoric—have controlled the discourse regarding American education, the social responsibility of faculty, and, very specifically, the teaching of writing. Like our students, he argues, we have allowed ourselves to be consumed and composed by others. He asks us to reclaim the art of rhetoric; in this moment, we, too, are a counterpublic (147).

Both inside and outside the classroom, Farmer wants writers to become agents of social change. In a moment where most of us feel astounded by our own silence, he demands that we shift our energies, rethinking our allegiance to composition—decorum, form, acceptance—to a privileging of rhetoric. Like Gerald Graff in Professing Literature, he insists that this is a two-pronged conversation, one with the goal of transparency in connecting the classroom to its surrounding structure. Like Christopher Breu, he insists on creative uses of the material at hand: “there can be no effective politics or political struggle without a careful attention to the material and discursive circumstances in which we find ourselves thinking, working, and acting.”

The instructor who seeks classroom-ready genres for this work will want more—the zine is a starting point—but Farmer’s purpose is elsewhere. He insists that we help our students to become agents of social change, and for those of us in the two-year college, the teachers of the majority of American college students and the workers who struggle in an increasingly exploited labor pool, there couldn’t be more at stake. In the end, Farmer’s work reframes our own, bringing us back to the philosophical underpinnings of what it is to write and reminding us why it is so important that we shift our ideas about the purpose of writing in this moment of the public turn.

Works Cited


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In *Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change at a Community Writing Center*, Tiffany Rousculp explains how she cofounded and directed a community writing center (CWC) at Salt Lake Community College. She explores the important, difficult questions that emerged from this work, including how a center can be a place for change. Rousculp’s book is a valuable addition to the field as more institutions, two-year as well as four-year colleges, are strongly committed to community engagement. Interest in this work will be mostly from people who either have a CWC or want to have one, and its narrative of the evolution of the CWC, and its various iterations and challenges, can be extremely helpful to those hoping to avoid reinventing the wheel.

Rousculp writes a narrative/case study interpreted through a theoretical lens of service-learning and ecocomposition. She traces her history with the project, illustrating the early efforts and critiquing her own decisions as she moved toward a center with the location, mission, and staff she worked to secure. Starting in 2001, the Salt Lake Community College CWC had “the mission to support, motivate, and educate people of all abilities and educational backgrounds who wanted to use writing for practical needs, civic engagement, and personal expression” (6). Through this mission, CWC can challenge a “norm” in literacy education by “opening access for people who did not see themselves as writers, from creating forums for public expression by overlooked community members” (150). Therefore, the CWC became involved in a variety of projects, including helping community groups write grants, publishing stories from adult writers learning to read, and writing and advocating for seniors in nursing homes.

Rousculp’s thinking about the center evolved from a “liberatory” approach to a “rhetoric of respect” (25). Like Paulo Freire, Rousculp wants education to help oppressed people be liberated, but she explains why the CWC should not impose this goal on the community and every writing project. Rousculp stresses the importance of a “rhetoric of respect” that requires a “flexibility and self-awareness” in how we should collaborate with writers from the community (25). In chapter 2, for example, she lists ideas that her CWC wants to challenge, including the belief that some writing projects are more important than others and the typical relationship between institutions of higher education and the community. She makes connections with the scholarship of rhetoric and composition and with service-learning, including a thoughtful discussion of Paula Mathieu’s *Tactics of Hope* and the challenges of a CWC becoming “institutionalized” (142).

Also, Rousculp uses ecocomposition theory to look at the complex interrelatedness of the various elements of a CWC, as if it were an organism. For example, she reflects on space and explains that the CWC’s physical location made a huge difference in who
was able to participate and who affected the projects they did. The CWC moved from an Artspace building across from a homeless shelter to a central location next to the main public library. In her discussion of space, Rousculp uses Marilyn Cooper’s metaphor of the web to illustrate how vibrations in one area reverberate and affect the entire structure of a community writing center. Successful projects include the DiverseCity Writing Series that brings together a dozen writing groups of diverse people. In addition, she highlights the consequences of unsuccessful writing initiatives, such as an English-only five-page application for community partners. She explains how the lengthy application process created a hierarchical relationship with community members. Throughout the book she tells helpful cautionary tales of initiatives that had to be reimagined and well-intentioned arrangements that backfired.

_Rhetoric of Respect_ can help us think about the important ways our institutions can deepen our community engagement. Besides being a possible source of inspiration to other colleges to start community writing centers, Rousculp skillfully challenges some of the language we use, specifically our assumptions surrounding terms such as _outreach_ , terms that imply that a CWC serves to address a lack or a deficiency in those who use it. Rousculp also warns, usefully, against “academic interpretations” of empowerment, itself a fraught term. This sensitivity to language use can translate to classroom learning situations and institutional or programmatic descriptions as well as to a community writing center. Future studies can build upon this work by expanding on tutor preparation for CWCs and connections to existing writing center scholarship that shares an emphasis on listening, dialogue, and nonhierarchical relationships between tutor and writer.

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**Teaching Creative Writing**

Primers are tricky. Aiming for an audience too broad may bore experienced scholars, while focusing on the esoteric may alienate neophytes. Written for all readers along the spectrum, Heather Beck’s _Teaching Creating Writing_ successfully maintains that balance by featuring a range of voices from American and UK schools with brief essays that focus on the discipline’s core issues, such as the usefulness/uselessness of workshops, the economic/professional weight of a creative writing degree, how critical theory can be integrated with pedagogy, and how/what should eventually be assessed in a creative writing course. As authors weigh in on these issues, they describe the machinery of their respective programs, course offerings, assignments, admissions policies, and administrative limitations. Arguments seem largely determined by location and context, showing us the landscape of a field whose theory and practice (on two continents) are still in development.
with much room for scholars and teachers to explore.

Topics begin with explorations of the discipline’s history that analyze the early days of writing assessment, followed by a list of workshop response categories, a reconciliation between inspiration and craft, and a look at the democratic underpinnings of the kinds of relationships a workshop inevitably emulates. Essays focusing on undergraduates, particularly in struggling two-year schools, justify creative writing’s place as a student-empowering/humanizing program that strengthens much-needed skills in reading, problem solving, and lateral thinking. Next, essays on postgraduate writers discuss the conflicts of professionalizing students and publishing and include calls for formalized research on content and form.

In the book’s strongest section—on critical theory—Kate Haake looks at the transformative power of creative writing followed by Rob Pope’s critical rewriting assignment. Pope asks his students to take an existing excerpt of the canon (Anglo-Saxon verse, for instance) to be rewritten/retranslated. Students are asked to document their decisions with a series of reflective writings explaining their processes. The rationale, as Haake reinforces in the previous chapter, is that “the most productive questions for our purposes are large questions that enable us to shift—students and teachers together—even just a little, in relation to what it is we think we are doing when we are writing” (133, emphasis mine). Pope’s assignment has exciting possibilities in this regard for its focus on metacognition in creative writing situations.

Undergraduate teachers of creative writing will be interested in a number of the book’s essays that may offer justification for teachers hard-pressed when responding to typical student questions such as “Why take creative writing instead of traditional literature or writing courses?” “How will the skills developed in this course transfer to others?” “Can creative writing be taught/learned?” “How can/should teachers claim objectivity during grading?”

By linking practice with theory, the authors’ answers to these questions provide relief for teachers struggling to convince undergraduates that creative writing is significantly more complex than the easy fluff course they might have been expecting. For scholars, the later sections of the book offer a blueprint of where the field’s research might be headed—that is, into the realm of systematized, structured analyses akin to composition. For administrators, the differences in UK and American programs highlight important gaps where both countries could take advantage. For instance, the UK’s focus on second readers and standardization combats grade inflation. In terms of publicity and student publishability, American schools will hire well-known authors as faculty to attract students while UK programs will invite literary agents to workshops.

With essays averaging four pages in length, the book feels like a collection of academic flash. Brevity is a strength here, however, as the authors understand the economy of space, wasting no time in making their point and exiting once made. This gives the pieces accessibility and, much like the clipped chapters of Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler,*
articles seem to end at precisely the point where the most interest has been raised. Yet by ending at these points, or at least offering a taste of the issues being discussed, *Teaching Creative Writing* shows us the shape of creative writing between its white space, letting us know as much by what has not been said through what remains unknown.

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**Footnoting “Typewriter” at the 65th Annual CCCCs**

We pewter-haired tweed wearers
Old-guard word weavers
(far fewer this year)
Watch the younger many celebrate themselves
In bright tweeted futures
This first day of spring.

Compositionists all
Keying words and images on screens of gleam
The stars of generations faded
Old market shares no longer traded
In a world wireless and office-free
Fluorescents dimming in empty classrooms.

Here among these lovers of silicon
I scratch lined yellow pulp
With an enduring ballpoint
(free with my thousand-dollar hotel bill)
My favorite multimedia still
The phonetic alphabet with sunlight.

Dana C. Elder

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Dana C. Elder lives with his wife, Heather, and their son and daughter in Spokane, and he also serves students at Eastern Washington University.