

Keller, Christopher J., and Christian R. Weisser, eds. *The Locations of Composition*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.

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That composition's early interest in cognitive approaches to writing (and universalist principles) gradually gave way to contextually sensitive theories that view writing as socially situated, determined, and acquired is now so commonplace that it hardly deserves mention. But as we are reminded in this well-edited collection of essays, we have not yet fully explored the idea of context in writing, in part because the term includes every space in which literate activity occurs, and in part because new media are creating virtual spaces for such activity that could hardly have been imagined when the field was in its infancy.

The Locations of Composition is an attempt to further those explorations. "By emphasizing locations," the editors explain, "we hope to emphasize places and their meanings for the discipline, with particular emphasis upon how those places lead to new spaces, new activities, and new instances of making room in the discipline" (5). The broad range of conceptualizations of *space*—as urban landscape, as bricks-and-mortar classroom, as electronic media, as genre, as *kairotic* occasion, as cultural geography—offers us an image of writing seen through a terministic screen of "location." In fifteen well-wrought chapters, we are taken on a scholarly tour of the concepts of space and place in composition, from classrooms to writing centers to public spheres to rhetorical topoi (5). This range, as the editors point out, is not exhaustive; instead, the collection is meant to "function in some ways as an introduction to the different places of composition and how they can and do relate to each other . . ." (6).

Viewing this project from the perspective of its contributions to scholarship in composition, *Locations* is certainly worth the price of admission into the Burkean parlor. As another title in a long line of what has become a canonical genre in the field, it artfully pulls together disparate perspectives on a concept that continues

to bear fruit in advancing the knowledge base of the field and filling a perceived gap. And the theme itself is timely, given the rapid expansion of discursive “locations” opened up by technology and the human interconnections afforded by the globalization of communication.

The collection is organized into three sections of five chapters each. The first section, “Across the Field,” considers space and location in broad, disciplinary terms. The second section, “Inside the Classroom and Beyond,” “mainly examines place and location as they relate to student writers and praxis in the classroom and elsewhere” (80). “Among the Institutions,” the third section, “explores different aspects of composition studies as ‘institutions’ and their relationships to other, more traditionally defined, institutions such as universities and workplaces” (10). In general, this organizational structure works well, though a number of chapters could be placed in any of the sections and not disturb the coherence. In a few chapters, the theme also seems a little forced, as if the contributor were twisting and pushing an individually compelling idea or exploration to make it fit into the space defined by the book. For example, Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber's essay on "The Locations of Usability," much as it wants to create frames for analysis into "locations" (metaphorical, rhetorical, methodological, and pedagogical), is really “a discussion that introduces compositionists to the subject of usability” as seen through several perspectives. Nancy Meyers' chapter, “Relocating Knowledge,” examines how a textbook (Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*) “acquires institutional and disciplinary authority” and “transcends its categorization and stigmatization” (230), the link to location being “its ranking in the larger textual body, its longevity in garnering esteem from disciplinary professionals, and its ability to appear to represent the values of a disciplinary culture, to build on them, and to reinscribe them” (231). The shifting uses and social constructions of *Classical Rhetoric* can, of course, be understood as its “locations,” but this notion is not as interesting as Meyers' analysis of the book's textual authority and its evolving history in

the discipline, an analysis that does not rely crucially on the concept of space but is simply enhanced by it.

From this perspective, the collection's contribution to the field derives less from its overall thematic impact than from each chapter's specific focus. We can imagine similarly worthy collections assembled from equally loose and nondescript themes: *Writing and Time: Essays on the Temporality of Discourse*, or *Composition and Materiality: Reflections on the Substance of Writing* (in fact, more than one author found it difficult to write about space and location without also invoking other concepts such as these). Amy Devitt's excellent piece on genre is as useful for the analysis of problems in the transfer of discursive knowledge as it is for its exploration of genre as rhetorical space. Tom Deans' chapter on service-learning is as interesting for how it interprets service-learning through activity theory as it is for its commentary on space: we already assume that service-learning takes place at the intersection of classrooms and off-campus spaces, but analyzing the complexities of genres, motives, and contradictions inherent in such courses offers something quite new. For their part, the editors admit the theme's impermanence, its resistance to definition, and its lack of usefulness in "mapping" the discipline; putting together a collection on space is, they write, a process of "dividing and subdividing," as if we are considering ecotones—dune giving way to sea or wheat field to rocky promontory.

Books also occupy space—physical, disciplinary, cultural. In this sense, we can view the collection in terms of its own space, not just as a published contribution to the field of composition studies but as a social construction of a particular disciplinary location in which it has placed the contributors through the process of solicitation, selection, and editorial response. As the diverse perspectives informing this collection argue, the discipline of composition has extended its borders both conceptually and literally (in writing-in-the-disciplines programs, in attention to digital technologies, in studies of professional and disciplinary contexts, in service-learning, and so on). Presumably, then, the relationships between theory and praxis, between research and

pedagogy, between reflecting and doing, form the center of that space, where such coalescences are mediated and instantiated in thousands of classrooms with millions of novice writers. As Janice Lauer put it almost twenty-five years ago, composition has its roots in a “distinct problem domain” that began when people “experienced a powerful sense of dissonance between their responsibility for teaching writing and the inadequacy of their understanding and training for doing so” (21). Instead of throwing up their hands, they “began to wrest from this dissonance questions about the nature of the writing process, its constituent powers and skills, its developmental phases, and its susceptibility to being taught as an art” (21). Of course, the “dappled discipline” that Lauer describes admits a wide variety of scholarly methods and traditions, from the clinically empirical to the abstractly discursive, and hardly a compositionist would deny the power and intellectual attractiveness of theory, even in its most arcane and unapplied sense. But it helps to remind ourselves from time to time that, as David Smit puts it in *The End of Composition*, the field’s “primary reason for being [is] the teaching of writing” (2).

This view of the central activity of composition as a discipline—the space in the Venn diagram where literacy development as a complex of human interactions and pedagogies meets theory and research—seems well aligned with the editors’ stated goals of bringing together writings about “the many different places that are important to the *field of composition studies*: classrooms, campuses, cities, workplaces, community centers, public spheres, MOOS . . . and blogs, among others” (2; emphasis added). Yet the space this book defines for itself is mostly a theoretical one, the section on “Inside the Classroom and Beyond” notwithstanding. It is a space where scholars reflect on other spaces from afar—sometimes in directly engaging ways, sometimes in the difficult, elliptical prose of postmodern theory. With some notable exceptions, these spaces are generally unpopulated by students. It is as if we are studying the architecture and human ecologies of subway stations or sports stadiums in the abstract, the bodies certainly within the realm of speculation but strangely

missing. We learn about the origins of space and place in the *kairos* of classical rhetoric but without implications for what writers do when they compose. We read Sidney Dobrin's compelling analysis of how composition has found "tenuous comfort in delicate places" but has neglected to "understand its spatial occupation" or recognize that "its attempt to find even temporal ground is dependent upon not its histories but upon its occupations and its abilities to continually produce counterhegemonies that question composition's places" (29). But we don't see how such metatheoretical notions of the field end up influencing the way we talk to learners about their work. Cynthia Haynes tells us that "when students elaborate on previous written discourse in [a] MOO, whether their own or another conversant, such elaborations provide additional meaning-making images of text, as well as the supplemental benefit of such input emerging as 'elaborate input'—input that is extravagant, detailed, and composed of multiple elements" (58). But that extravagant, detailed, multiply composed text lives here only in our imagination.

It is not as if the field's deep roots in pedagogy are left buried. Classrooms are invoked in interesting and theoretically engaging ways, and some pedagogical approaches, such as having students write about the spaces they occupy or creating courses around the theme of place, offer exciting ideas, even when painted in broad strokes. But rarely do these conceptual notions give way to scenes of their enactment: places where teachers and students are working and writing together, whether through students' voices, examples, storied lives, or detailed instructional strategies. For seven chapters, the activities of teaching and learning occupy no space. For another five chapters, instructional or textual activity remains an abstraction, with classrooms (or other contexts for writing) present but unoccupied. Nedra Reynolds' artfully written account of the Harvard University video project *Shaped by Writing* offers us a mirrored space in which we see students only indirectly, by looking into teachers looking into a film that looks at the academic lives of actual students and teachers. Two chapters that do indulge our yearning to occupy spaces where writers are at

work offer brief but welcome glimpses: Peter Vandenberg and Jennifer Clary-Lemon's chapter "Looking for Location Where it Can't Be Found" argues that graduate students need to "see that the production and dissemination of knowledge is connected to a wider context of historically imbalanced resources, power distribution, and competing ideologies" (98) by moving "out into . . . localized publics" (99). Illustrating this movement is the experience of one of the authors (Clary-Lemon) who, as a graduate student, tutored a woman in a YMCA community service center. In "Teaching the Capital City," John Ackerman convincingly theorizes a composition pedagogy based on sociogeographic writing. In one first-year composition assignment, students "determine [their] 'standpoint' in relation to others in any physical, natural, or cultural landscape" (122), using the methods of memory, return, walking, maps, and records. Ackerman's analysis of excerpts from student Luis Leon's paper demonstrates the instructional potential of focusing on the "rhetoric" of space and location. The final essay in the collection, Christopher Schroeder's "Note Toward a Dynamic Theory of Literacy," begins in the middle of a "buzzing" cafeteria of a summer transition program for mostly Hispanic high school students in Chicago and then, through survey research, analyzes "complex locations" they occupy in their education and in their communities (275); but the survey results, and what Schroeder makes of them, are as close as we get to the actual students.

Only in Robert Brooke and Jason McIntosh's chapter, "Deep Maps: Teaching Rhetorical Engagement Through Place-Conscious Education," do we see more than snapshots of students' work. Brooke and McIntosh first describe several pedagogical approaches in which students map, both visually and textually, their daily routes and locations or their personal histories of moving between communities, or write directly to members who occupy a specific space. Significant parts of the essay showcase student Kate's "considered space" deep map and its accompanying essays focusing on historical and geographical elements of Lincoln, Nebraska; and Abby's "personal location deep map," which

extended an analysis of the Nebraska Regional Mental Health Center (where her mother worked) into a critique of state governmental policies on mental health funding (144-145).

This is, of course, a collection as much about composition as a field—an intellectual and scholarly discipline—as it is about composition as activity and as pedagogy. And it is as much about *all* the spaces and places of writing as it is about the spaces of composition instruction. But absent of students, no amount of Bachelard, Foucault, or de Certeau will really help us to "create disciplinary status" (30). We yearn for a space in the academy that garnes intellectual respect, and we try to occupy a place removed—at least, as a field—from the demeaning "service" work of composition instruction that (we fear) strips us of intellectual credibility. We "examine the idea of occupation" (20) or we consider writing as "force . . . with which we contend and by which we leave our own trail of images" (59), or we entertain the idea that the "relocation of composition's disciplinary focus to a place called 'the public sphere' can be seen as both a continuity and a disruption" (42), without venturing into those wonderful and perilous contact zones, where lofty theoretical constructs are put to the test and live or die in the complex environment of teaching and learning. With a few exceptions, the authors are more engaged in theorizing the concept of space or speculating about the cultural geography of the field than in giving us a picture of how specific, concrete notions of space and place can draw students toward richer, deeper, and more engaged literacies.

This disciplinary problem is somewhat ironically called to our attention in the previously mentioned chapter by Vandenberg and Clary-Lemon. The essay cites a study of syllabi for "gateway courses" in seventeen PhD programs in rhetoric and composition during the mid-1990s. The syllabi show how "the overwhelming commitment to scholarly writing as virtuoso performance in graduate training in composition studies effectively abstracts future writing teachers from material location and into the hyperreality of a professional discourse that recognizes an obligation to little more than effective generalization" (92).

Similarly, the reference-heavy works here, diverse though they are in focus and orientation, define a scholarly space in which theorizing *about* composition, placing it into a subject position that pushes to the periphery its central activities and pedagogies, simply perpetuates practices reified in the broader realm of academic work—driven more by the credit cycle of scholarly publication than by the challenges of understanding how people learn to write and how best we can help them to learn. (And although the editors can't be faulted for the index if they didn't produce it themselves, its overwhelmingly name- and concept-heavy nature reflects the book's preoccupation with theory at the expense of teaching writing. The word "composition" and "teaching," for example, appear only once each, in book titles; "students" and "learning" not at all. But "genre repertoires," "heterotopias," "hyperreality," "gentrification," "instrumentalism," "ideological landscape," "considered space," and "*nomoi*" all get their due).

In this respect, it is interesting to note that none of the twenty-one contributors to this collection references another important work on space: Nagelhout and Rutz's *Classroom Spaces and Writing Instruction* (Hampton Press, 2004), which deliberately sets out to explore the "intersections among classrooms, spaces, writing, and instruction," using "learning spaces" to help us expand our "concept of spatiality beyond a material, physical location." Nagelhout and Rutz included a number of instructionally grounded chapters that considered the "inertia of classroom furniture" or the relationship between physical space and embodied movements ("Active Minds, Invisible Bodies"). That *The Locations of Composition* might position itself as an extension of the somewhat more theory-and-practice-blended *Classroom Spaces and Writing Instruction* does not seem likely, or we would have been told so. But it is precisely this location of the concept of space away from the realm of teaching—including the realm of contributions like Nagelhout and Rutz's—that reveals the distance between the goals of this work and the concerns of novice writers, whether conceived purely pragmatically or from the perspective

of the scholarship of teaching and learning, reflective practice, reflection in action, or a host of other intersections of theory and methodology.

As a contribution to the work of *composition*, a field that neglects at its peril its roots in teaching and learning, *The Locations of Composition* may frustrate those who look for meaning in the relationship between theory and instruction, just as it will energize those who prefer theory to mucking around with struggling writers. The strength of this book is in its heuristic value, as a springboard for considering how we might bring about many of the interesting ideas it presents.

The field of composition occupies vast potential spaces. Its central place, however, will always be the classroom. It is unfortunate that the politics of composition and its yearning for disciplinary respectability have led it to a place in which tilling the soil of praxis represents a baser activity than designing the plow or reflecting on the future of the land.

References

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